

Ex Libris

C. K. OGDEN



THE KILLING OF A VOCATION

The Killing of a Vocation

By An Ex-Nun



LONDON: HURST & BLACKETT LTD.,
PATERNOSTER HOUSE, E.C.

The Killing of a
Woman
By . . .

LONDON: HURST & BLACKETT LTD.
STATIONERS' HALL, LONDON, E.C.

The Killing of a Vocation

CHAPTER I.

IT is exactly twenty-one years ago to-day that I became a nun, and I was just twenty-one years old.

It is a sort of fatality that I should begin to write the history of my religious life on this particular day and year, but I am impelled to do so by I know not what force within me. My friends have been harrying me to put down on paper my experiences and so here I am at last trying to do so.

What I am about to relate is fact, not fiction. There will be neither exaggeration nor distortion of facts. The only disguise will be in the names of the personages, of the places, of the Order, so that no one will be able to say : " I know these nuns."

I was born in the United States of America, of English parents. My Father was a Professor of

English Literature at one of the Universities. My Mother gave her life that I might live. I have often regretted it. I pass over my childhood and youth entirely, except to remark that I was given no religious instruction whatever.

When I was seventeen my Father sent me to Paris to a Convent School to be "finished" as so many American girls are.

It was a new world, a new life. My Father had stipulated that I was in no way to be influenced by the nuns towards the Catholic Church. I must aver that as far as possible the nuns had no direct religious influence whatever on me. But on a highly-strung, imaginative, poetical nature atmosphere must necessarily make an enormous impression. So subtly, imperceptibly prejudice began to melt away.

These nuns were of every nationality : French, Spanish, English, Italian, German, Austrian, and so on. Those who had charge of the school were a picked lot, highly educated, of aristocratic origin. To all these advantages were added the beauty and set-apartness lent by the charming habit. These dove-like women in their soft fawn-coloured habits and snowy veils, flitting silently, with downcast eyes, through the

cloisters, appealed extraordinarily to a beauty-worshipping "jeune fille."

The Convent School rules exacted that the pupils should assist at Mass and at the religious instruction, no matter what their creed. At first the Low Mass bored me ineffably. The religious instruction was a matter for merciless dissection, for utter intoleration. It was labelled mediæval, utterly impossible of belief. But little by little it began to seem less incredible, less ridiculous.

I used to watch the nuns going to Holy Communion, their hands joined, their eyes downcast, a look of ineffable radiance on their pure faces—and I wondered.

There was a beautiful choir. It was a revelation, a soul-stirring experience to hear those pure, passionless voices echoing through the lovely Gothic Chapel. It raised one almost to ecstasy in its sensuous appeal.

One Christmas night will remain in my memory for ever. Just before the stroke of Midnight the Chapel was brilliantly lit up, flowers were everywhere, the Sanctuary a bower of beauty. The few pupils who remained for the vacation were ushered to their places.

Then the nuns in their flowing robes walked in

procession to their stalls in the Choir, when suddenly an angelic voice from the tribune flowed forth singing the " Minuit, Chrétiens."

Slowly the Superior rose from her stall followed by the other nuns, and reverently holding in her arms a lovely Image of the Infant Jesus, she went to the Crib prepared for Him in a side Chapel and laid Him in the manger. She stooped on one knee and kissed His Feet, the nuns did so too, then slowly returned to their places.

The girls rose from their benches and filed by. Mechanically I went too, and I shall never forget the thrill that shook my whole being as I knelt and kissed the Sacred Feet of the Infant Saviour whilst the pure voice in the choir sang on and bade the " populace fall down and adore the Redeemer."

And so gradually, imperceptibly the influence around me, the example of the seemingly perfect beings penetrated my indifference, my scepticism, and I began to pray.

I remembered how, as a mere child, time after time, I had thrown myself on to my knees and implored that if there were a God, He might reveal Himself to me. There was a Church of England prayer book belonging to my Mother

that I found by chance in my Father's study. I stole it, and looking through it, discovered a prayer beginning : " Enlighten our darkness we beseech Thee, O Lord." Being terrified of the dark, I used to whisper this prayer till I outgrew my fear, and forgot the prayer.

In my second year at the Convent I determined to ask my Father to allow me to become a Catholic. He replied that I was old enough to choose my religion and that I could do as I pleased.

I was baptised with much pomp and ceremony. The nuns declared afterwards that my complexion had grown much fairer since the devil had been cast out by the holy water of Baptism.

That night was a terrible one. Whether the devil resented my becoming a child of God, as the Church has it, or not I do not know, but he led me a terrible dance.

I had spent an hour in the dim light of the Chapel, preparing for my First Communion on the morrow, and felt very happy and peaceful as I went up to bed.

Suddenly an extraordinary feeling of depression and horror possessed me. I felt some dreadful presence by my bedside. People say

that dogs are conscious of invisible evil, their hair bristles and they show signs of great distress. Sweat broke out on me, my heart beat furiously, and my soul felt rent within me. For hours I sat up, agonising, praying, making the sign of the Cross. Towards dawn I fell asleep from exhaustion.

The nun who decked me out in my white robes remarked that I did not seem very eager to make my first Communion, as I had not hurried to get up. Little did she know what I had been through. I was exhausted in body and soul.

Some glimmer of happiness came to me during Mass and while I made my thanksgiving, but while my companions and the nuns rejoiced during the day, a terrible, black oppression weighed me down. I told no one, and I have never done so till now.

I had an immense reverence for the nuns. They represented Our Lord to me. They were part of Him, His Brides. For one in particular I had a great, holy affection. She was beautiful in every way, and I have always worshipped beauty. Moreover, I was thrown into her company for many hours each day. She gave me

private coaching in several subjects. Together we produced and often wrote plays, arranged tableaux.

She was taken ill, and for several weeks I saw nothing of her. I wrote her a letter saying that I missed her dreadfully, that I was *désolée* and hoped she would soon be better. I handed this to a sister, and asked her to be so kind as to deliver it to the sick sister.

Shortly afterwards I was sent for by the Reverend Mother, with whom I was on most excellent terms. She received me coldly, told me to kneel down before her, She then accused me of having an impure affection for the sick nun, She raved and ranted and said I had behaved outrageously, She said I was most sinful, that I had incited the sister to sin, that I had been going to Holy Communion in a state of mortal sin . . . and so forth.

I knelt there absolutely aghast, I had not the remotest notion of what she was accusing me. I had never known that an affection could be impure, and I did not know what impure meant. It was not till many years had passed that I realised with rage and horror what she meant.

“You must go immediately to confession.

The confessor is now with Sister X. Let me tell you that you will never see her again."

Weeping bitterly, I went into the confessional. I said: "Father, I have been sent to you to confess something, but I do not know what it is."

He asked me all sorts of questions, which, by the mercy of God, were Greek to me, fortunately for my purity.

"Father," was all I could say, "I don't understand what you are talking about."

At length he gave me absolution, for I know not what sin, and told me to spend the rest of my life praying for my fellow sinner.

The effect of this episode on my character was bad. Love of any kind must be wicked, sinful, I thought. If the affection so reverent, so pure for this Bride of Christ, who to me was a part of Him, was bad, then no love could be good. I would never love anyone again.

Shortly after this I bade a tearful farewell to my companions and the nuns and returned to the United States.

CHAPTER II.

DURING my absence in France, my Father had married a young and charming woman. Natalie welcomed me with open arms, though she thoroughly disapproved of my conversion—or perversion, as she called it.

I found that my own Mother had left me some money, and that now I had attained the age of nineteen I was to have the control of it. It amounted to about three thousand dollars a year.

My Stepmother took me to New York and we enjoyed a perfect orgy of buying pretty frocks and undies, and all the thousand and one things that a young girl needs when she is being launched into society.

I had a hectic time—was fêted and petted and paraded “straight from Paris with such a lovely little French accent, quite cute.” I enjoyed it all thoroughly, though I had disquieting scruples of conscience sometimes.

But I did not forget my religious duties. The nuns had told me that I ought to find a spiritual

14 **The Killing of a Vocation**

director in my home town, who would counsel and guide me, and I made it my business to do so.

He exacted that I should attend daily Mass, go to Confession and Communion once a week, and give at least one hour a day to prayer.

It cost me a great effort to obey him, but in my first fervour and exaltation I was too glad to do so.

One day as I was meditating in the Church, I seemed to hear a voice within me say : " I want you to make a vow of chastity." My soul was filled with rebellion. I shut my ears to the insistent voice. I told myself that I was an imaginative little fool. But day after day this voice made itself heard. " But I don't know what a vow of chastity means," I would urge. At last, worn out by the real fight, I gave in and vowed myself to God.

In spite of the fact that I had a spiritual adviser, it never occurred to my mind that I should consult him, or tell him of what was happening to me. It is difficult to convey in words the reality of the demand made upon me. To this day I believe that I was impelled to make this vow by God.

From such a vow to a religious vocation is but a short step, and little by little the idea grew upon me that God willed that life for me.

I was a terribly sensitive girl, and the sorrows and suffering of humanity harrowed my soul. Life appalled me—terrified me. I would throw myself on my bed and weep for hours with pity for the poor and oppressed, with the vague horror of the facts of life. And I told no one.

My Confessor asked me one day if I were in love. "Yes, Father, with Our Lord," I replied quite simply. The good Padre was non-plussed for the time being and had not another word to say. Yet it was with the utmost sincerity that I said this.

Then for a time I gave up nearly every religious duty. I went to Mass on Sunday no more. I deliberately shut my heart and thoughts to the voice of God and conscience. I went with Natalie to dances and parties, flirted desperately (and how innocently, as I look back now), and had a thoroughly good time.

Then, suddenly, I refused to go to another dance. I remembered my vow of chastity. How could I allow a man to hold me in his arms when I belonged to God?

One day I told Natalie that I intended consecrating my life to God. Naturally she was furious, she disapproved of such a life utterly. So did my Father. Never would he give his consent.

But I felt that God demanded this sacrifice of me. I did not want to go in the least, but it seemed to me that I must obey this pressing, insistent demand within me.

My Confessor had no hesitation in affirming my vocation. No one needed me. My Father was perfectly happy with his wife. I must not delay.

My thoughts turned of course to the Convent where I had been converted. The Mother Superior wrote that she would be delighted to receive me into the Novitiate and even fixed the date for my entry.

And so, knowing nothing of life, of human love, or of temptation, I renounced that of which I knew practically nothing, and put from me all earthly joy and happiness.

CHAPTER III.

To return to my old Convent was more like going home than anything else. The nuns whom I had known thronged round me when I arrived, and petted me and spoilt me for the first day or so.

Then I was conducted to the Novitiate and introduced to my fellow postulants and novices, in all numbering forty.

I must confess that I was barely conscious of my own ego during this time. It was like a dream. My own individuality had disappeared, my personality was submerged.

On the day on which I was formally received into the congregation I was led into a large room where a number of old sisters were seated in rows as though they were in Choir. At their head sat the Superior, before whom I was told to kneel. A paper was thrust in my hand and I was told to read aloud what was written there. I requested in formal terms, and in all humility, to be received as a postulant into this Holy

18 The Killing of a Vocation

Order, and I promised obedience and sundry other virtues.

Then the Superior placed on my head a white veil, rather like a nurse's, and bade me welcome as a future sister and member of the Order. She embraced me, and so did all the other sisters. There were tears in the eyes of some of the older nuns . . . a little white lamb had been rescued from the jaws of the wicked wolves, the World, the Flesh, and the Devil.

Still in a dream, I was shown my cell by a novice who had been told off to teach me the essential duties of a postulant. "I will come back and fetch you in half an hour ; that will give you time to put your things tidily away."

I went to the window and glanced out at the beautiful park, at the little stream that flowed at the end of the Convent property. Then I turned and surveyed my cell. It was a room about eight feet by twelve. Against one wall was a bed which, on sampling, I found to be extremely hard, and on pulling it to bits the following morning I saw that it consisted of a wooden board fixed on low iron trestles, a straw palliasse, and a pillow of chaff.

How often did I thump that pillow with both

fists so as to induce a slight hollow wherein to lay my aching head. And how my body ached and felt beaten and bruised for weeks till it grew accustomed more or less to the unyielding bed.

There were a deal table, a wooden chair, a small cupboard, on which stood a basin about as large as a fair-sized pudding basin, and a jug in proportion, a small tooth glass, *et voilà tout*. My arrangement of things consisted of placing stockings and underclothes in the cupboard. Everything else had been packed away in my trunk as useless. Having finished my task, I knelt on the board by my bedside and tried to collect my wits. I kept murmuring, "I love Thee and I give myself to Thee, that's why I am here."†

My first meal in the big, austere Refectory was a great ordeal. All the nuns stood with downcast eyes in front of the long tables on either side of the room. The Superior had a table at the head, in between the tables, so that she could dominate the assembly. I was ushered into a seat near a lay sister at the farthest end from the Superior. When everyone was in her place a long Latin Benedicite was said, with much bowing, and at last we all filed into our places.

There were no tablecloths. We ate out of a coarse brown porringer, with wooden forks and spoons, which we washed up at the end of the meal in earthenware drinking bowls, which we wiped with our napkins. The food I found to be simple and good, but the hugeness of the portions appalled me.

During the meal a nun read from a pulpit, and the poor thing must have found it a great strain to make herself heard above the clatter of plates, changed by the lay sisters who waited at table.

When we had finished eating, the Superior clapped her hands, and, after another lengthy prayer, we filed out two by two.

As we neared the Refectory door I noticed that the nuns seemed to step over something, and when I reached it my heart nearly stopped beating, and I felt sick all over—a nun lay there, face downwards, stretched across the portals, and the hundred or so nuns stepped across her.

How many times in after days did I perform that act of penance, and force myself to realise that it was a penance, that it was for Christ's sake that I was thus humbling myself.

Then, after some more prayers in Chapel, we went into the park, and surrounded the Mistress

of Novices, chattering and laughing with her as we slowly strolled about.

One or two of the sisters had been fellow-pupils of mine, and for the first day or so we were allowed to pass the time of day, but I soon discovered that no kind of friendship was allowed among the sisters. Never might one chat alone with one sister ; three or four together occasionally in a group might do so, but even this was not countenanced by the Novice Mistress, who liked to have her flock around her, listening to her, talking to her. French had to be spoken always.

Before I entered the Novitiate I had had no real idea of what the nuns did. Obviously they taught and prayed, and said Office in Choir, but that was all I knew.

Now I found they had long hours of meditation, many penitential exercises, silence all day except at the two hours of recreation and when teaching or any other duty forced one to speak. I found there were Convents of the Order in many parts of the world to which a fully-fledged sister could be sent without question.

There were a good many lay sisters, whose duty it was to do the menial work. They

substituted a certain number of rosaries for the Latin Office said by the Choir sisters.

The " Ordo Diei " was as follows : A loud bell tolled at 5 a.m. We were instructed to spring instantly from our beds, to make the sign of the Cross. Whilst we washed and dressed we had certain prescribed prayers to say ; the bed stripped, we hastily and silently descended to the Chapel, eyes downcast. We then knelt on the bare floor in front of our stalls. An hour's silent meditation ensued, it being considered a sad lack of fervour if we sat down during that time,

I must confess that generally I spent this hour wondering how soon it would be before I flopped on the floor in a faint. But I used to hold out by sheer will power. At half-past six Prime was recited, and it was a welcome relief to stand up and sit in our stalls, and move a little. Mass followed, during which many nuns received Holy Communion. At 7.45 we filed out of Chapel to the Novitiate, where further prayers were recited and we were exhorted to practise certain acts of virtue which were inspired by the feast of the day.

Breakfast came at last, hot coffee in our ugly

bowls and as much bread as we liked to wolf down. Then a rush to the cells and dormitories, where beds were made, slops emptied, floors swept, and the place dusted.

Thence to the Novitiate, in a wild but quiet scurry, for we never had any time to waste. Here a special instruction was given for an hour on the Rule of the Order.

Sisters were admonished of their faults, penances were given and performed. Such as to kiss the sisters' feet either in the Novitiate or in the Refectory during a meal (this was a terrible ordeal at first to a timid, shy sister, and I must confess that I always disliked doing it), to kneel in the middle of the Refectory or Novitiate with arms extended as in the form of a cross whilst certain prayers were recited, to lie prostrate in the middle of the Refectory till the Superior signalled for one to rise ; to wear a placard round the head on which were inscribed in huge letters such epithets as : Disobedient, Proud, Vain, Lazy.

At the end of the instruction the novices and postulants went off to their various duties for the week, such as helping the lay sisters to wash up, sweeping corridors, the Chapel, giving lessons to

the pupils. Others sat and studied at their desks in the Novitiate Theology, the writings of St. Thomas, Latin, the Rule.

Later on there was a Choir practice, at which several professed sisters, to whom the novices were not permitted to speak, were present.

At 11.30 the Little Hours were said in Choir, during which I used to feel ravenously hungry.

Dinner at mid-day, followed by an hour's recreation, which was considered as much a religious exercise as Office. If fine we walked in a group for half an hour, then we returned to the Novitiate and took our sewing, which consisted of mending the linen of the Community.

For the first time during the day the sisters were allowed to raise their eyes and to speak. Of course if they went to the school they had to speak, but out of the school there was always silence.

Then followed half an hour's spiritual reading. Lives of the saints, spiritual treatises, and so forth, generally in French. At the end of this quiet time there was an hour's lesson in Theology or Church History or Catechism. It was a sleepy hour, and the novice who sat next to me invariably had forty winks.

From four to five there was an hour's meditation in the Chapel, followed by Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

Vespers and Complin succeeded. Dinner came at six o'clock, recreation for an hour, half an hour of free time in the Novitiate when one rendered an account of one's conscience, one by one, to the Novice Mistress.

I used to wonder what on earth my fellow novices had to say each evening—what scruples of conscience they could rake up. Somehow I never had any, and used to rack my brain for something to say to her. There was no escaping the ordeal. One had to say something. It was to me a truly terrible moment, nightly.

Anglo-Saxons do not find it easy to rake over their souls, to dissect them and to hand them over for inspection. But the Latin races seem to revel in it. I used to watch Spanish, French and Italian sisters on their knees before the Mistress of Novices jabbering away nineteen to the dozen. One sister who came from the South used to have a paper a yard long, which she would bring forth, and go through it item by item, and woe betide the sister who was in a hurry, whose turn came after hers. She used

to do the same thing when she went to Confession.

At 8 p.m. a bell rang out the Great Silence. Not a single word might cross our lips till after breakfast on the following day.

We went off to the Chapel to prepare our meditation for next morning, then said Matins and Lauds.

Bed was a blessed relief, hard though it was, after the tension of the day.

After a few weeks I became more *débrouillée*, more alert. I knew my way about, and did not flagrantly break the Rule.

I was given one or two charges, the arrangement of a small Altar in the Novitiate, which brought me much joy and many tribulations—joy because it was the only outlet I had for expressing my sense of the beautiful. I was allowed during the spring and summer to gather flowers wherewith to embower Our Lady's Statue. This gave me the chance of roaming in the park to find daffodils and green leaves, of being alone with Nature for a while, of getting fresh air. The arranging of the flowers was a joy to me. But, alas! when winter came artificial flowers had to be substituted, and how I hated

them. I was born untidy, hence my tribulations. Now it was a heinous sin to leave things about. Twice was I warned not to do so. One day I was called away just as I was putting a huge bunch of artificial lilac and roses away. I dumped them down on a certain table, and forgot all about them. As a penance I was made to wear them tied in a bunch round my neck for as long as I remained inside the Novitiate that day. I remember bringing a pretty piece of blue ribbon to the Novice Mistress wherewith to tie them around my neck.

“ Ribbon, indeed. Get a bit of string.”

At the time it was a dreadful humiliation. Several Choir sisters came for a choir practice, and stared at me with laughter in their eyes. I was told to sing the solos, with all eyes fixed on me.

“ Christ was made a fool of, and mocked, so I can bear it for His sake,” I thought.

I was given some lessons in the school, English, music lessons, and I was glad of the change.

But I got into trouble because my pupils liked me and showed that they did so.

Sometimes I wondered if I could endure this

narrow, shut-in life. As I wandered about gathering flowers for the Altar I would look at the high walls and think of the rush of life outside, of the joy and laughter and innocent happiness.

Then I would pull myself up short and remind myself that I had a vocation, that the World with its seductions was not for me, that Christ had put His Seal on me, I was His.

I once told my Mistress of Novices that I felt like a caged bird. " Shall I open the door and let the bird out? " But that I did not want.

The recreations were to me simple boredom. In winter we sat round the room on low chairs, our feet on the bitterly cold stone floors. The Novice Mistress sat at the head of the room with a mat beneath her feet. We were not permitted to converse with our neighbours. Conversation must be general—and such conversation, so infantile, so trivial. Most of the time I spent murmuring prayers, praying for patience, utterly ashamed of myself for not being able to become an infant again.

One day an English sister came up to me at recreation and said : " Look here, I want to

give you a word of warning. If ever you hear anyone in authority begin to talk about washing, shut your ears, don't allow your brain to register what is being said."

I thanked her and wondered. Of course I missed my daily bath most horribly, but I did manage with lots of goodwill to wash myself all over in my tiny basin night and morning.

As I was not at all strong, I was allowed in the summer to go down to the one and only bathroom, in which there were exactly three baths for the use of some three hundred people, at 5 a.m. and have a cold bath. I discovered that I had shocked the sister in charge most dreadfully because I had taken my plunge as Nature made me, and had not worn the chemise laid there for me. After that I used to dip the chemise in first, wring it out, and then take my own dip. Horrible hypocrisy, but *que voulez-vous?*

Then, one day, at an instruction to the whole Community, the Superior General said :

" Sisters, it has come to my ears that some of you allow the children to tie their chemises round their waists and wash under their arms. This indecency must not be permitted. Whatever washing they do must be done beneath their

chemises. I cannot think that any sisters could be guilty of such immodesty."

It is easy to say, "Close your ears to these things," but when in full Chapter such words are spoken, they must be heard. Terrible.

No wonder the Novitiate smelt like a sheepfold. If one went in at recreation time, some time after the other sisters, one was staggered at the awful stench.

After my cold baths ceased, I never had another bath for eighteen months. It sounds incredible, but it is true. Comment is unnecessary.

The pupils were gathered from the very best families in Europe, yet none of them bathed more frequently than once a month. On Saturday afternoons I was told off to conduct parties of girls to take footbaths, in silence.

Some of the daring Spaniards used to pull up their undies as high as ever they would go, so as to shock me, and they would glance naughtily at me. I used to preserve a stony countenance, but laugh up my sleeve at them and their antics.

After a short period of enjoying a cell to myself, I was put into a dormitory where some fifty novices slept with windows hermetically sealed,

no matter what the temperature, and oh! the smell. I wonder we were not all poisoned.

There was a French sister beside me who would scramble out of bed at 5 a.m., and be in the chapel at 5.5.

In Chapter the novices had from time to time to accuse another sister of their external faults. If only one could have accused them of being dirty—but that was not a fault apparently.

Had it not been for the comfort and consolation I experienced when at prayer, I do not think I could have gone through my Novitiate. God was very good to me, and spoilt me the greater part of the time.

Of course there were periods of utter desolation when God seemed not to exist at all. But when almost at the last gasp He would appear again and all was well.

At the end of three months, because I was deemed to be a fervent postulant, with every sign of making a good nun, I received the habit.

It is a very beautiful ceremony. Decked out in white satin robes, in full bridal array, covered with jewels (either these belong to the Novitiate as stage props, so to say, or they are the novice's own), I approached the Altar accompanied by

the Mistress of Novices and the Superior General. Here, after sundry prayers and a moving address by a well-known dignitary of the Church, I made my offering of myself to God. My jewels were removed and placed on a golden tray, a lock of hair was shorn, and then I was led from the Chapel to a Sacristy, where my finery was removed, and the habit was donned in its stead. Further ceremonies and blessings were resumed on my return to the Chapel, followed by the chanting of the Magnificat. I was a nun at last.

I had a wealth of long curly hair, and lots were drawn among the novices as to who should shear me of my locks.

That night when I went to bed I sat down at a table in the dormitory, whilst a sister with a huge pair of scissors cut every bit of it off and laid it in long gleaming strands in front of me.

It was a bit of a wrench. I felt absolutely and irrevocably severed from the world.

CHAPTER IV.

IT was on the first day of May that I took the habit, and all Nature seemed to conspire with me to praise God and to rejoice in the gladsome event. Lovely sprays of white lilac decked the High Altar, and the air was impregnated with its heavenly perfume.

The novices are always granted a whole day's recreation on the occasion of a *prise d'habit*. We were allowed to stay longer in the Park, encircling the Mistress of Novices or her Assistant. The new novice was accorded the place of honour by her side and was always the object of congratulation and envy on the part of the postulants, whose one idea in life was to be clad in the habit.

On going to the Refectory for the mid-day meal, instead of the accustomed silence, broken only by the *lectrice* in the pulpit, we were allowed to talk, to raise our eyes and look at our fellow eaters. It was the first time I had looked around

me in the Refectory since I had entered the Convent, so I was deeply interested. I gazed round, noting where certain sisters sat, and had a good look at the older sisters with whom the novices had nothing to do.

"You have got a real nun's head," said the old lay sister by whose side I was. "The veil sits on it properly. I can always tell."

I felt very flattered and pleased. She was a nice old thing, in spite of the fact that she used her fingers to her food more often than is usual in polite society. She wore false teeth, and although my eyes were usually glued to my plate, I could not help seeing how she removed them from her mouth at the end of each meal, washed them in her drinking bowl, wiped them on her napkin, and replaced them in her mouth.

I never got over a sick feeling of horror and disgust each time she did it, and I was heartily thankful when a couple of new postulants arrived and were placed between us.

She told me an amusing story, a very old chestnut, I imagine. In a certain monastery it was the rule never to ask for anything in the Refectory, so that if they forgot to serve a

brother, he went without, unless his neighbour saw the omission. One day a monk found a mouse floating about in his soup. Calamity. What could he do about it? He had a brain wave. He glanced into his neighbour's bowl. No mouse there. Beckoning to the lay brother, he pointed to his neighbour's porringer. "Brother X. has no mouse in his soup."

The trick was done. The horrified lay brother twigged the situation and whipped off the offending soup. The Sacred Rule had been kept. I rather wondered if the same soup came back minus the mouse but with its flavour remaining.

As my gaze wandered round the Refectory, flitting from one face to another, my mind wondered why all these women had become nuns, whence they came, what had been their life in the world they had renounced. Seated near the Superior were some very old nuns—eighty, seventy—some with sweet, placid faces, others with repulsive ones, deeply lined, with great big noses, with long tufts of hair on mouth and chin, with red, bleary eyes. "Horrible," I thought. But I pulled myself up. "The Beauty of the King's Daughter is within," said my better self.

36 The Killing of a Vocation

“ But how much nicer when it is without as well as within,” said the old Adam, or Eve, within me.

There were some very lovely faces, too. There was a South American with enormous dark, velvety eyes, set in a face of perfect features, with the skin of a magnolia bloom. I never tired of looking at her. And I was told that when she went to the big parlour where all sorts of visitors assembled, every eye was fixed on her.

And so the great day for which I had longed had come and gone. I belonged a little more utterly to the Spouse and Master for whose love I had renounced all earthly love, all finite happiness. A two years' trial lay ahead of me, before I should be able to pronounce even my first vows, then two more years must elapse. Then only should I belong absolutely to Christ.

But I had my private vow of chastity, which I hugged the knowledge of secretly, and renewed every day at Mass and Holy Communion.

A novice receives far more initiation than a postulant. She is one of the Fold once the habit clothes her, and much more is expected of her. For the first time the Rule is expounded to her,

the struggle for a life of perfection is made more severe.

I think that in the lives of all novices there comes a period when a sort of dull stupidity settles over their minds. They seem to understand nothing, they do everything wrong, they are awkward, unresponsive.

This trying period now foundered on me. As a pupil, as a student, I had always been alert, intelligent, distinctly brainy in fact. Now I became inert, suddenly stupid, incapable of grasping anything.

We had to learn by heart a paragraph of the Rule each day, and to recite it word for word to the Mistress of Novices before her instruction every morning. Never once could I repeat my lesson without faltering or making a hopeless muddle of it.

Once I had been wont to learn off three hundred lines of poetry in a quarter of an hour, and then rattle them off without turning a hair. Now I would spend hours trying to drive a dozen lines into my head. Then I would stand up, knees a-tremble, to recite them, and not know them. Such scaldings, such penance. "Of course, it's ill will, *mauvaise volonté*. Mais

38 The Killing of a Vocation

you are too *bête* to be a nun, my poor child," and so on.

I was the laughing stock of the Novitiate. I spent my days on my knees, being scolded or penanced. It was the same for all the lessons. I used to whisper to Our Lord : " I offer it all to You. I love You, so I will bear this humiliation for Your Sake," as I knelt on my poor old marrowbones.

But I was deeply humbled by it at the time. It was very good for me. I might have been horridly vain had I carried everything before me as I had done as a student.

Great attention was paid by those who instructed us in the practice of the Presence of God. This means that our whole life should be spent in the continual thought that God is with us, sees us, hears us. This was inculcated by the constant use of ejaculatory prayer. At one time, much later on, this practice had become so much a part of me that I actually felt the presence of Christ at my side continuously, even when I was teaching. It was as though two people in love were seated in a dark room, yet were aware of one another's presence. I do not know how else to explain it. Let it be put down

to imagination, or whatever you will, but I must in conscience record the fact.

I am describing with absolute truth, in so far as I am able owing to the inadequacy of language, the physical and spiritual emotions of my religious life.

There are soul-moods and soul-storms that no words can adequately express, but there is much that can be said that will give some idea of the inwardness of the Soul's Life.

I began to understand during the instructions in the Novitiate something of what the words Poverty, Chastity and Obedience mean. Something, I repeat ; it was not for many years that I really understood their full meaning ; till I had had to count the cost of those vows in bitter suffering, in agony of heart and soul. The theory of things is so easy ; the practice how difficult.

It seems so easy to be poor when all the mere necessities of life are given to you, when you despise all earthly possessions ; so easy to be obedient when one is like a dog whose eyes are fixed on his Master, ready to jump at his faintest sign ; so easy to be chaste, when one has just renounced all earthly loves.

A novice cannot understand nor realise what these vows mean. She is a child, ready and all too willing to bind any and every burden to her back. Like a woman engaged to marry the man she loves, she is ready to suffer anything for him—to give royally—so is a novice. She is filled with a wonderful spiritual, supernatural love. She is blind to reason, is deaf to fears and doubts and hesitations. She is a fanatic, ready for immolation.

A real nun is a Willing Victim, a Living Holocaust, immolated by the Church and her particular Order to God. During the period of infatuation, of ardour for self-sacrifice, this may be very blissful, but how long can this, does this last? Is it possible to be heroic, day in, day out, to the end of one's life?

From time to time such thoughts would assail me, but they were thrust hastily aside as horrible temptations of the devil. God had called me, and I had responded with all my heart, soul, and body. It was irrevocable, final. And—I loved Him.

Poverty, according to the Rule of this Order, means that nothing whatsoever may belong to a nun—clothing, books, money. We wore any

clothes that were given to us. I remember that as a postulant I was given a grey cape that had been worn by, I should say, a whole generation of postulants before me. It had food stains all down the front, and was thick with grease round the neckband. It was my first initiation to real poverty and it was little to my liking. How often was I scolded for those humiliating stains which I had ineffectually essayed to remove with soap and water from the offensive and offending pelerine. Rather hard lines I thought at the time. Fortunately my sense had not deserted me as yet, and I was able to grin up my sleeve and bear it.

All my beautiful prayer books were taken from me, and old, battered, extremely greasy ones were given to me instead. It was useless being dainty and squeamish, but it made me feel quite sick at first to touch those brown-stained leaves that smelt as I turned them over. But after a time such things became mere pin-pricks. It was just one thing more to offer to God.

When I entered, all my money and jewellery were taken from me, and kept, I believe, by the Novice Mistress in case I were not to succeed

as a nun, in which event they would be returned to me. My income was paid into a Bank in Paris, and from time to time I was requested to write cheques payable to the Superior General. It is only when the final vows are made that your money is made over finally to the Convent.

All this is the material side of poverty. But what about the poverty of spirit? It means the quenching of all temporal desires, of all earthly satisfactions, of all preferences. By this vow a nun can dispose of nothing, receive nothing, waste nothing. By this I mean literally nothing, not the smallest object.

By the vow of chastity, a nun binds herself to the utmost purity of heart, of mind, of body. Every fibre of her heart, every thought must belong to Christ. No friendship may be hers—no earthly preferences or affections.

A great war is fought at any evidences of what are called *amitiés particulières*—special friendships. We were not allowed to walk or sit by the side of the same sister twice following, not only in the Novitiate, but all one's life. In the school all affection between pupil and mistress was discouraged. The tendrils of our hearts

must not twine round any earthly person or place.

By our vow of obedience we gave up our will into the hands of those above us, representing God. No matter how unreasonable, how painful, their behests must be obeyed, not only in act, but in the mind. The Superiors' ideas, desires, expressed wishes must be embraced wholeheartedly as coming direct from God. We must become like corpses, which have no volition, to be moved here or there, made to do this or that. To think one thing or another blindly, entirely, to submit our own judgment utterly, all this does the vow of obedience exact. Comment is useless.

My one reply to any doubt or rebellion that surged up within me was : " My God, I love You. I will bear it all for Your Sake."

But what drilling, what coercion did I have to bring to bear on that wayward will of mine. I was no tame cat. Some time before I left America a palmist had read my hand and exclaimed in surprise : " Why, I've never seen such independence of mind, of character, of action on a woman's hand before." I had not thought anything of it at the time, but in my

tough fights I had reason to remember what the woman had said.

There was a monthly exercise, which to the Anglo-Saxon must be about the worst ordeal possible. We had to go to visit the Novice Mistress privately, in her room, kneel down beside her, and give an account of one's conscience. How my heart used to beat till I could have fainted when the fatal hour approached.

"Well, my child, and how have you been getting on?"

"Oh, all right, thank you," I would stammer.

"But you must be a little more explicit than that." Then would follow soul-searching questions, and I was expected to expose the most sacred aspirations and most intimate thoughts in the name of obedience.

"You must learn to be simple—it is a terrible fault to be so wanting in simplicity."

"I am sorry, Mother, I will try," I would mutter, wriggling one leg over the other, and thus nearly pitch forward on my nose.

How I envied those French, Italian, and Spanish sisters, who could placidly jabber about their souls for hours and hold up their consciences for inspection at any time.

What my Mistress made of me I don't know. I do know that years after she confessed that she had not understood me at all, and almost begged my pardon for not having done so.

I admired and revered her much, but it is not given to the average French soul to comprehend the average Anglo-Saxon soul.

The Novitiate itself was not a soul-inspiring domain. It was quite apart from the rest of the big Convent, and consisted of three rooms that had been stables, I should guess, in former times. Stone walls, stone floors, stone ceilings; they were never heated, even in the bitterest winter weather, and Paris can be almost as cold as New York City. It was petrifying.

All round one of these rooms were black tables with a drawer in them. Each sister was assigned a place at one of them. We sat facing the grim stone wall (extremely prison-like, I used to think in my wicked moments). We were not allowed to look about us, and never must one word be pronounced in this room under any circumstances whatsoever. The Novice Mistress's room adjoined this, and a small dark ante-room where we kept shawls and rubbers and work-baskets.

There was a further room, where we sat round for the recreation and for our instructions and lessons. Sitting there sometimes, I used to feel as though I were sitting on the top of Mont Blanc in my chemise.

How I longed for the spring and summer always. At this time I was very delicate, and suffered from heavy colds on my chest. I was perpetually tired, and to complete my misery I had a series of housemaid's knees, first in one then in the other. I said nothing about it, but managed to kneel somehow, though it was torture to do so. Then I began to limp, and that gave me away. I was badly scolded for not having said anything about it before. I was taken to see the Doctor, who said I was very run down and must get more fresh air. How I blessed him for that. I was told that henceforth I was to take my lesson books and work in the park and be out of doors as much as possible.

It was bliss to sit out in the woods, out of sight of the house, alone, to watch the buds burst into leaf, and the primroses poke up their yellow heads and the celandines bloom in all their glory. How grateful I was to my painful old knees, worn

all hard and scaly by kneeling for hours at a stretch on the bare ground.

But in spite of the extra fresh air, I had wretched health. I could not eat like the other novices. Great portions would be served to us and we were expected to eat everything set before us. Most of the sisters got rid of their plates full easily enough, but I could manage only about a quarter of mine, and that gave me hideous indigestion. I was of course reported. "If you were truly obedient you would force yourself to eat everything put before you."

There was an English sister who sat next to me, who was very much in the same boat as I was. We pitied each other, but never dared to say anything. She was eternally being scolded for not eating, and she used to force herself till she was sick. I remember squeezing her hand one day as I passed her at recreation, and said, "You poor old dear." She looked at me affectionately, but said nothing. Next day she was not in her place in Chapel or Novitiate. Then at recreation we heard she was dead. She had gone to bed after Office as usual. The sister in the next cell to hers heard her moaning in the

night, but thought nothing of it. But when she rose in the morning, she again heard moans, and went in to see what was the matter. The poor thing was leaning over a basin full of blood, and before the Infirmarian could arrive, she had fallen to the floor dead.

It was a terrible shock to us novices. We were a very silent, serious flock for many days.

But I was not worried so much about my food any more, and they kept a sharp look-out on my health for a time.

We were supposed to tell the Novice Mistress if we felt seedy or had a headache each evening before Office. As I was often tired and had headaches, I begged her to let me off this ordeal. She did so, but it was a bad bargain I had made. For however ill I felt, I went to Office, whilst a robust novice with a slight *malaise* would be packed off to bed early. Still, I could not endure the stupidity of saying night after night that I felt seedy. I made up my mind that this was a Cross I must bear like any other.

During an instruction on obedience we were told that however ill we might be, once we had told our Superior that sufficed. If no notice were taken of us it did not matter. We had done our

duty. If we died, still it did not matter. It was the Will of God. Our lives were not our own. If we were put on the shelf, so be it. If we were taken off it and given prominent positions, God's Will be done. But were we to die, to be put on one side, there would always be plenty more sisters to replace us. A nun was a cipher, neither more nor less.

CHAPTER V.

ONLY occasional tidings from the Great World came to us from time to time in our peaceful backwater. Letters from home were still eagerly looked for and welcomed. My Stepmother wrote every week, and once a month I was allowed to write to her or my Father. But I found, as the months flowed uneventfully and swiftly by, that my life at home grew extremely remote. Could it have been I who went to dances and fêtes, who had half-a-dozen *beaux*, and spent hours planning a new spring or summer trousseau? All the vanity left to me was to look and to be clean, to have spotless veil and guimpe and not to soil my precious habit.

What cared I that the soap we used for face and hands was also used for scrubbing the floors, or that the shoes we wore cost two francs fifty.

When I entered I had some very lovely shoes,

bought at Hanan's, long, slim, patent affairs. One day I had been caught in a heavy shower in the Park, when gathering flowers for the Altar, and my solitary pair of shoes were soaked. The Novice Mistress happened to see me, and ordered me to change at once and put on a pair of my "worldly" ones.

I had charge of the pensionnaires at recreation time. I had to call for them at the door of the Refectory, when they filed out in silence till a prayer before play was said. As they passed me, every eye was glued to my lovely shoes. When I had put them on, a tiny movement of vanity had passed through me, but I was well punished for it by the stares and remarks of the delighted pupils. I wished I could sink through the ground.

There is not a thing that a schoolgirl does not spot immediately. A new novice is quizzed, commented upon, condemned, tolerated, hated or adored. "Who is she? Where does she come from? How pretty or ugly she is," and so forth. And somehow they manage sooner or later to ferret out one's nationality, age, family name, position in society, and so on.

Unfortunately for me I came under the cate-

gory of the adored ones. I had a good voice, that had been well trained both in Paris and in New York. I had been put into the Choir almost from the first, and was given most of the solos to sing. A nun with a voice is to be adored, as a rule.

But it was a heinous crime to evoke adoration. There must be some innate coquetry or worldliness left.

The fact is that the poor children so strictly cabined and confined were thankful and eager to have some small form of excitement in their dull lives, so that a good-looking attractive young novice was a god-send to them.

I went among the pupils a good deal. I gave singing lessons, violin lessons, and I taught English to the foreigners. But I did not take much notice of them. I was too engrossed in studying the devout life.

Prayer had always had an enormous attraction for me. Long before I knew anything about the Catholic or any other religion I had knelt for hours absorbed in some sort of prayer. So now I tried to learn everything about it that I could, both as a science and as an art.

We were supposed to choose a subject for

meditation at night, think of it in bed, and the following morning the carefully prepared points must be gone over, resolutions and affections being drawn from the subject-matter, as the Jesuit method teaches.

Most conscientiously would I do all the first part, but when I came to the Chapel in the morning, and the "Veni Sancte Spiritus" had been recited, nine times out of ten I would find myself powerless to proceed as per Rule, and would be plunged in the contemplation of something totally different.

It is difficult, almost impossible, to write about this side of my life. It is too sacred and intimate, and not really necessary for my purpose in writing this book. Suffice it to say that it is the joy and exaltation that I derived from prayer that sustained me through my Novitiate and religious life. It was that alone that made it possible or bearable.

During the summer holidays Superiors from the various houses of the Order, scattered in many parts of the world, would come to the Mother House on a visit of several weeks. The novices who were nearly ready to be thrust forth from the Nest to try their own wings would eye

each one of these potential Mothers and wonder which would be her fate. It was an exciting time, and for the poor fledgling an unhappy one.

To leave the Novitiate was a great wrench. One had been carried along, so to speak. The fervour of one's fellow novices, the exhortations, the example of the older sisters upheld one.

But the idea of taking wing to a strange house with nuns one did not know, with a Superior who was not the well-loved Mère-Maitresse, was a terrible one. Almost like leaving home again.

No signs of perturbation or sorrow must be evinced, though many a surreptitious tear was shed at night in the dormitories under cover of the swishing sounds of the discipline being administered to one's white flanks within the security of the white curtains surrounding the beds.

When I was a postulant I rejoiced in the privacy of a cell, but when I took the habit I was transferred to a large dormitory, where I remained for eighteen months.

It was a fearful ordeal at first to draw forth one's discipline made of whipcord, with seven knotted tails, and apply it lustily while one

endeavoured to wrestle with the recitation of a Miserere, and to know that one's neighbours could hear every stroke. I used to wait for some audacious soul to begin, and then would chime in with her, till a general chorus would arise.

But what I suffered most from was the fact that no windows might be kept open at night, no matter what the weather. Never shall I forget the long, suffocating summer nights and the stench that arose from some forty unwashed bodies. I would lie awake for hours, enduring it, offering it up to God as a penance for my sins, chewing it, so to speak, with every breath drawn. Then at long last I would fall into a horrible sleep, pursued by nightmares of Hell.

It seems unbelievable that in the twentieth century such insanitary conditions still exist. The foreign sisters did not mind, indeed they would have cried out had a window been opened, but to the English and Americans it was torture.

I remember an English girl coming from London to be a postulant, but when she had dined once in the Refectory, and slept once in a dormitory, she refused to stay another day, and was forthwith packed off whence she came.

Brave soul. But she was held up to us novices as an example of a weak, immortified creature.

Mortification—how much that word means and what terrible suffering can be and is endured in its pursuit. Its literal meaning is to put to death self, everything that does not spell perfection. It is a large order.

Let self die that Christ may reign in us. There must be no ego left. We must rise above the weakness of the flesh, the weariness of the soul, the outcry of the heart.

All and every earthly satisfaction of heart, mind, or body must be renounced. Not only must suffering and pain be accepted, it must be sought after and embraced. The Crown of Thorns must not merely rest upon the head, it must be crushed into the very brain. Every means to crush and to kill self must be resorted to. The secret weaknesses of the soul must be hunted out and ruthlessly squashed.

Exterior penances were imposed as an aid to mortification. "To kiss the sisters' feet in the Refectory" was one. Let me describe it. One would perhaps have just unfolded one's napkin and placed the wooden fork and spoon in position, one's brown bowl filled with water to drink, when

one became aware that one's neighbour was thrusting forth a foot beneath the narrow, three-foot-wide table. One hastily stuck out one's own, endeavouring to cover it with the hem of the habit at the same time, and not always succeeding.

It was a real penance to some. With hands clasped and eyes lowered, one bobbed breathlessly up and down before each sister, knocking one's head on the edge of the table and feeling a fool, which one was meant to do. When one came to the more unsavoury feet of the lay sisters, some of whom had spent the day in the farmyard milking the cows and looking after the hens and pigs, one was thankful to have the ordeal nearly over. Yet this was a penance one did several times in the week.

Another penance was to dine in the middle of the Refectory on one's knees. A stool was brought by a neighbour at table and placed before you. Then she brought your portions, which you gobbled up as fast as you could so as to have finished before the others.

Or one prostrated in the middle of the Refectory till the Superior gave a signal for you to rise. Sometimes she forgot for some considerable time

that you were lying there, and you felt more of a fool than ever, and began to wonder if you would remain there till the meal was ended.

Or one prayed with one's arms in the form of a cross.

There was one form of penance which was not often practised. Indeed, the two years I was in the Novitiate I alone performed it. I had been getting into hot water generally and, being more than usually stupid, when the Novice Mistress called me and told me that at the following Chapter in the Novitiate I should be accused by all the sisters of my faults.

Chapter is a ceremony that takes place in most modern Communities on Sunday. In the old monastic days it was held every day before Mass, hence the Chapter-House in so many ancient monasteries. It consists of an exhortation from the Superior to his assembled Community (all must be present), followed by the self accusation of each monk or nun of their faults committed against the Rule since the previous Chapter.

The subject kneels before his or her Superior, says his or her say, is given a penance, and returns to his or her place.

On this particular occasion, when all the sisters

had accused themselves, I had to rise from my seat, kneel all alone in the middle before the Novice Mistress, and then all the novices knelt round the room and in turn accused me of various faults. The Assistant Mistress remarked that I did everything with negligence, and so on. Then I had to acknowledge myself to be guilty of as many faults as I could remember from the catalogue, and humbly ask pardon for the disedification that I had given.

It was a queer feeling kneeling there—rather like being put in the pillory. The only thing that rankled was the accusation of negligence. As a matter of fact, the whole thing was merely a trial of virtue. In after days I saw this penance performed perhaps three times, when the sisters were accused of some trivial breach of the Rule, no one daring to accuse them of serious offences. Most hypocritical.

There were only two forms of bodily penance *de règle*, so to say, to take the discipline on Wednesdays and Fridays, and to wear an instrument called a cilice for five hours on those days. This cilice or bracelet consisted of a series of wire circles attached to one another to form a bracelet about two inches wide, the inner side of which

was adorned with sharp spikes, some forty in number, so that when this thing was clasped above the elbow they stuck into the flesh, and were extremely painful. For many years I had a series of bloody holes round my arm. Woe betide the unfortunate nun who received a blow or nudge on the arm while she was wearing her bracelet.

CHAPTER VI.

THE time had come for me to be admitted to make my first vows. There were six of us ready to do so. To prepare for this great day we made an eight-day retreat. This meant that we spent much more time in prayer, did not associate with the other novices, nor did we go near the children. Strict silence had to be kept the whole time. We received special instructions from the Mistress of Novices. We had already made a retreat during the summer holidays, but in this case a Jesuit priest had preached us four sermons a day during the full eight days, and we had made a general confession of our whole life at the end of it.

Every hour was mapped out for us, for meditation, for spiritual reading, for making the Way of the Cross, for saying the Rosary.

When one really prays it takes it out of you more than any amount of fasting or penance. I used to have an extraordinary sensation of lightness, of weakness, of other-worldness as though

64 **The Killing of a Vocation**

my body had been through a hair sieve, after a few hours' prayer. It was an effort to come back to earth and to go on living.

At the end of this retreat I felt so extraordinarily changed—rarefied, if I may express it thus—that I no longer knew my own self. I felt an utter stranger, another being. It took me months to get used to it, and I have often wondered if I relapsed into my old personality or whether I slowly adapted myself to the new one, got used to it and forgot I had ever been someone else.

The taking of the vows is a moving ceremony : a most awful and sacred moment when one kneels at the Altar rails while the priest holds the Sacred Host before you as you pronounce the vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience for two years, according to the Rule of your Order.

As I pronounced my vows and received the Host I felt taken possession of, shaken to the foundations of my being. Most strange, most terrifying, most mysterious.

And so I became " Sponsa Christi," a Spouse of Christ. Hitherto I had been borne in His Arms ; now I was to be launched forth to try my own feet.

CHAPTER VII.

DURING the two years and odd months that I had passed in the Novitiate I had never crossed its portals. So that it was with some feeling of dismay that I found myself enveloped in a dark blue hooded cloak that completely covered my habit, and with a last blessing from my Novice Mistress and a hurried farewell to the novices, was thrust into an open victoria by the side of my future Superior.

As we careered in the usual mad way through the streets of Paris to the Gare St. Lazare I was bewildered at the noise and the rush and flurry. The pistol-like reports that the *cocher* made every minute with his whip made me jump nearly out of my skin.

The Mother must have noticed my panic, for she laid a plump hand on my arm and said : " My poor child, you are not used to this noisy world,

are you? . . . I hope you are going to be very happy with me in your first House. The sisters will give you a warm welcome, and I am sure you are going to be very useful to us."

All I knew about the Convent to which I was going was that it was in the West of Scotland, a smallish Community, with a boarding school. The Mother was an Irishwoman, very old, very stout, almost as broad as she was long, with a merry twinkle in her aged eye.

In the train to Calais she produced her Breviary, and I followed her example and tried to fix my mind on the recitation of my Office, but it was in a turmoil. After a time I closed the book and looked out of the window at the flying landscape. It was good to see the green fields again and the cows munching the grass or placidly chewing the cud. It seemed an eternity since I had last come over this route to enter the Convent. Then I was free, an independent being. Now I was a captive, in Chains—Love's Fetters.

The Mother went to lie down as soon as we got on board, but I was allowed to remain on deck. It was a lovely autumn day, the sun shining, the waves mere ripples, caressing the sides of the boat. How good to see the sea again. I had

missed it so the last two years. I wondered whether I should ever see it again. It was quite possible that I should live for the rest of my life in the Convent to which I was going. I had heard others speak of sisters who had lived for thirty or forty years in the same house, some much longer still. I was just twenty-three. I might easily live forty or fifty years longer. Appalling thought. Could I endure to live with the same sisters, doing the same duties, seeing the same scenes, all those years? "Why, yes, if it be God's Will. My life is consecrated to Him, to do His Sweet Will, no matter the cost."

I kissed my crucifix and gave myself up to drinking in the wonders of the sea.

On our arrival in London we managed to charter an old, broken-down "four-wheeler," on which our modest baggage was placed, and we jogged slowly across London to catch the night train for Scotland.

"Would it not have been quicker in a taxi, Mother?" I ventured to say.

"Oh, no, my dear. We are not allowed to go in taxis. His Holiness the Pope does not approve of them, nor does our dear Mother General."

Being a meek little novice, I humbly accepted the dicta of such exalted beings. It was not for me to question why.

After a night of sitting erect in a third class carriage, the pangs of hunger clawing at my vitals, my head jogging forward with snatches of sleep and sudden awakenings, it was distinctly refreshing to be brought a cup of tea and some bread and butter by some charitable soul, and to be told that it would be but a few hours now before we arrived at our destination. I was much too weary to ask any questions or to find out where we were. I was in a dazed condition until I found myself seated beside the Mother in another old hack, jogging along to my future home. Then I managed to pull my scattered wits together.

“Are you not very tired, Mother?”

“No, my child. I slept soundly all night; but you look quite washed out and good for nothing. You shall go straight to bed when you have had something to eat, and there you shall stay till mid-day to-morrow.”

How I thanked Heaven for this command.

Suddenly the cab stopped, and as we bundled out a big door opened, and a bevy of nuns, chat-

tering and gesticulating, welcomed us in. I was too utterly played out to take anything in. The Mother confided me to the care of a sister, a rosy-cheeked, middle-aged nun, who, having fed me in the empty Refectory, took me to my cell and left me.

I murmured a few prayers as I undressed, then tumbled into bed and slept like a corpse.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WEEK had passed, and I had begun to know my way about. I had taken stock of my new sisters, of the pupils, of the house, a dear, clean little Convent, of the grounds. I had settled into my cell, a tiny slip of a room with a window looking out over the Convent Cemetery. I had begun to miss the ties and props of the Novitiate less.

I had found my way to the one and only bathroom, and had learned that, as I was still a novice, I must ask permission to take a bath once a week, which, thank God, was freely granted. What a relief after two bathless years.

I liked the little Convent, with its pretty Cloister gardens, its orchard, kitchen garden, and farmyards. There were some lovely green fields, where the cows pastured, and a fine view of tree-clad hills in the near distance.

There was room for at least sixty pupils, but there were only forty. The Community

consisted of about eighteen Choir and twelve lay sisters.

Choir sisters are those who say Office in Choir, who are supposed to come of good class families and to be well educated. The lay sisters are of the peasant class as a rule. Most of ours were of Irish origin, petty farmers' daughters, or Italian peasants, many from Bergamo, strange to say, others Basques from the South of France.

The majority of the lay sisters here were Irish. Their duties were to do the cooking, the housework, the washing, baking, and brewing (they made quite good beer two or three times a year, and I remember seeing the cows very drunk, staggering about the fields, after having consumed the remains of the hops).

These sisters wore a black habit and coarse white linen veil. Kindly, good-hearted souls they were for the most part, and, as I discovered later on, there were some really amusing characters among them.

I found that I was an absolute babe in the Community. Several sisters were in the late seventies and sixties, one was over eighty, and the rest of them were well over forty. To a young

woman in her early twenties still, they seemed very old. No one seemed to die up here, ever.

The first few days at recreation the time was spent in asking questions of the Mother about her visit to the Mother-House, recounting any small items of news that had cropped up during her absence.

The first day I noticed a very aged nun seated near the Mother, who, though knitting, seemed to be blind. The pebbles of her glasses were pressed close to her eye-balls, and she spoke in a high squeaky voice. But she never appeared again at the recreation, and I was much mystified. Then, one day, coming from the school, I saw her clad in an old, much stained dressing gown, a large and dirty handkerchief pinned to her side, standing in front of a grandfather clock in the corridor. She had the front of the face open, and with one finger was feeling the time, and incidentally pushing the large hand on. Then I saw her totter down the corridor and go into a room that I had not noticed before. The poor old lady was hard of hearing as well as blind. I was appalled at the sight of the dirt and misery of the room in which she lived. A lay sister slept there with her and was supposed to keep it

and her clean, but it was both unaired and unclean.

In those first days, when I had not so much to occupy my time as later on, I used to see a good deal of her. I would read to her, sometimes undress her and put her to bed. Each garment had to be put into a special position, so that she could place her hand on it. She used to frighten me at first. She would lie in her bed, her enormous stomach predominating every other part of her, eyes closed, looking as though, if not yet dead, just on the verge of death. I would go on reading solemnly, wondering all the time if she were about to give up the ghost. Then suddenly she would gasp: "Oh my G.O.O.O.d," very long drawn out, as though her last breath were leaving her body. Then she would perk up and ask some cheerful question, or tell me a funny story.

One of the most amusing stories she had was this. In her palmy days she was Sacristan. The Bishop was consecrating the Chapel or something equally solemn. The ceremony was in full swing, everything going swimmingly, when at a crucial moment, lo and behold! the mitre-bearer had vanished, with the mitre.

Where could he have gone to? The sister rushed out of the Chapel, searching wildly in the adjacent parlours and in the Sacristy. No mitre-bearer anywhere. Then a brainwave came to her. She rushed to the lavatory, flung open the door, and there enthroned sat the mitre-bearer, with the mitre on his head.

We never got any further in the story than this, for the old girl would chuckle in her high falsetto, and if one had a sense of humour, one went into gusts of laughter.

She loved to recount this story to any visiting priest in the malicious hope of shocking him.

It was a lonely, uncared-for life she led, with just an occasional half-hour with a nun who had to get a special permission each time. Holy Communion was taken to her by the priest after Mass several times a week. Sometimes I accompanied the procession. The room was tidied up a little, and she would have on a clean night-cap. She would lie prone, as though she were dying.

She had a habit of giving false alarms, and had received the Last Sacraments many times. One night after Office we were told that she was dying. The priest arrived and we all went with

lighted candles, two by two, to her room and knelt round. I looked at the bed expecting to see her well-known recumbent but mountainous figure. Behold, she was sitting bolt upright, washed and brushed up, with a snow-white frilly night-cap over her bald pate.

Presently, when she had been anointed and had received the Holy Viaticum, the priest wished to apply to her the Plenary Indulgence, and told her to say the Holy Name. I nearly exploded, solemn though the moment was, when I heard her squeak : " Jesus," in the highest note I have ever heard a speaking voice pitched. The pompous Padre looked so shocked when the old lady took his hand and thanked him, and said she thought she was not going to die just yet after all. " Still it's better to be on the safe side, isn't it, Father? "

Half an hour later she was sitting on the side of her bed, legs dangling, asking for something to eat.

She had an amazing memory and would rattle off long poems by Scott that she had learned some eighty odd years ago. She used to sit in an old carpet chair in the Chapel in a corner in front of the stalls. I often knelt near her and

she used to tell me she felt I was there, and envied me my imagination, which enabled me to pray so long without stirring. The dear old soul and I became great friends.

She lived on for several years, and was very proud when we fêted her on her ninety-second birthday.

She got very feeble towards the end, and was bedridden for some months. So it was a great relief for her when at last she did die. I was with her for some hours that last day. She lay breathing stertorously, with her blind eyes staring in front of her as though she saw something. She was not quite unconscious, for she clutched my hand in hers and relaxed her grip from time to time. The Assistant and I prayed for her for a long time; then suddenly she gave a great cough as though she were in full vigour and health. I whispered to the Assistant that it was the end, but she said it could not be. However, it was. I leant over the poor old soul, and saw at once that life had flown.

But I am anticipating, with a vengeance.

After a few days' grace I was pitchforked into the School. I soon learned that I was the only sister with any pretensions to a solid education or

with any real knowledge of teaching. Soon I found myself with every available moment of the day filled up. Lessons from 9 a.m. till mid-day . . . from 2 p.m. till 5 p.m. and sometimes six, and a recreation to keep both morning and evening, with twenty minutes' drill thrown in.

I felt rather shy at first coming among these strange, quizzing girls, but I soon found my poise, and we became good friends before long. For one thing, I was young and gay and alive. At recreation I taught them baseball of a modified kind and played with them, running as quickly as they could. They took it up with zest, and we got up some really good matches.

In class I had the knack of being interesting, graphic in my descriptions, and of making lessons a game, not a penance. But I had many a long day's fight to get them to like to study.

All this was good for me. It took me out of myself, made me forget for the time being my tired old body and my soul.

At the nuns' recreation I found that I was expected to be seen but not heard. "Little children," don't you know. The sisters sat round the table in the Community room, the Mother at the head, and I would creep quietly in,

take my work and sew in silence usually. Fortunately I had a bare twenty minutes in the morning, sometimes less in the evening, for the sister who replaced me would come late regularly.

But, on the whole, these were happy days. I prayed hard and worked hard. Every moment, every action consecrated to God.

I saw a good deal more of the Superior at this time than most of the sisters did. I was still a novice, so more particularly to be watched and looked after. Most days I would spend half an hour with her, reading to her or merely chatting about the religious life or my duties. At one time she made me go with her every day to the lay sisters at the end of the mid-day recreation. I had to read in English instructions made in French. They did not understand French, so could not read the instructions made at the Mother House in that language. So I was called upon to read them in English straight from the French text. It was some ordeal at first, but after a few days I managed to sail along in great style. It was good training for me, too ; I had to have my wits about me, and it improved my fluency of speech and gave me self-reliance.

The lay sisters would sit round the kitchen on

low wooden stools preparing the vegetables or fruit with their hard red hands. It made a wonderful picture—the great fireplace, glowing red, the burnished pots and pans on the shelves, the red-tiled floor, the light and shade cast on those silent, consecrated women, studies in black and white. And sitting in the place of honour sat a very stout, apple-cheeked old lady, her flabby white hands crossed on her stomach, taking forty winks, while beside her the slim young novice in her dove-grey habit read from a ponderous tome. The whole house seemed wrapt around with silence.

Then suddenly the Convent bell would peal forth—a mellow, deep-tongued bell—and the whole countryside for miles around would know that it was two o'clock.

The Mother would unfold her hands, open her eyes, and try to look as though they had been closed in meditation only; she would give the sisters a blessing and, in silence still, they would all rise from their knees and go about the afternoon's work.

CHAPTER IX.

A GOOD deal more individual liberty was allowed to the sisters here than in the Novitiate. Each one had her time-table of duties and religious exercises, but I noticed that at odd moments of the day sisters could be seen walking in the grounds taking exercise singly.

There was one sister who tramped round the place some dozen times a day.

We had more recreation too. In honour of some special feast an extra hour or two would be given, and it made a pleasant break. We would make our spiritual reading together, one of us reading aloud while the others sewed. We were never allowed to sit with our hands idle.

The sisters in charge of the children's lingerie bagged my services at once, so that whenever I was at recreation with the sisters, I found myself re-seating a pair of pants or putting patches into something or another.

There was a wild Irish girl who found out by accident that I had re-seated her pants. I could not make out why she wriggled and blushed and could not look at me for days.

The girls thought, as I myself had thought in my young days, that the nuns were exempt from all human needs, had no ordinary bodies in fact.

The Head Mistress of the School was a tall, stout woman, about sixty, very bulgy in body and domineering in her ways. I would call her to myself "the Great Mogul." Her presence had an extraordinarily damping effect on both the children and the Community. We would be chatting gaily together at recreation, then she would appear; smiles would vanish, constraint come over us. She had an enormous idea of her own importance and status. She took it upon herself to bully the poor old Mother, who, for the sake of peace at any price, would give into her. The majority of the sisters kow-towed to her and tried to keep on good terms with her. They knew it paid to keep on the right side of her. She was Bursar as well as Mistress of the School, so she had nearly everything in her own hands.

Till I arrived she had been giving a good many

lessons, but very shortly after I had settled down she turned them all over to me, and went to the School only to give religious instruction, for roll-call, and to scold the children.

The children began to grow very fond of me, for obvious reasons. I was with them from morning to night, played with them, talked to them, told them stories by the yard. If you can spin a good yarn you hold your pupils in the palm of your hand. I was very young, a novice, and American, different to the others.

Gradually the Head Mistress began to realise that she no longer had any devotees. She had never been popular, for the children feared her, and her sudden rages, her biting sarcasms, and her favouritism.

So she began to be jealous of me ; she accused me, to the Superior, of playing up to the children, of looking haughty when she spoke to me in the classes. She said I never punished the girls. " I never have any real occasion to," I said. " I don't believe you." She said that the other sisters hated to replace me when I had been with the children, for they vented their naughtiness on them. On many occasions I found her listening outside the classroom door when I was

84 The Killing of a Vocation

giving a lecture and had unexpectedly gone to find a book. Even the girls were aware of it, and made remarks about it. I do not know of what she suspected me.

One day I met her as I was on my way to the School at 9 a.m. She stopped me in the corridor.

“ Why do you always look so washed out and tired every morning, sister ? ”

“ I don't sleep well, sister. ”

“ Do you *do* anything to yourself ? ”

“ What on earth do you mean ? ” said I, laughing.

Not for many years did I realise what she meant. To suspect me, a novice, with a vow of chastity, of vice. I shall never forget the tone in which she said it. Thank God I had not the remotest notion of what she hinted at. If I had I do not know what would have happened.

All this came as a great shock to me. I had thought nuns were more or less perfect, and that petty jealousies were unknown quantities in their lives.

The first Good Friday I spent in Scotland the Mother sent for me, and when I knelt beside her she said that the Head Mistress demanded a

private apology from me. We had already asked forgiveness at the Chapter of one another for any pain or disedification we might have given. This apparently did not suffice her.

“ But why, Mother? I’ve not done anything to her.”

“ Well, my child, she complains that you have been rude to her and look haughty and proud when she speaks to you before the children. Now, to please me, I want you to go to her and be very humble.”

I had to go to the Chapel and kneel at Our Lord’s Feet and put myself into the right dispositions before I could bring myself to do it. She had absolutely no right to exact this penance of me.

However, it was Good Friday, and I felt I ought to be glad of the chance of being really humiliated. So I went to her in her room, knelt down, and begged her pardon for any offence I might have given her. Whereupon she gave me a long sermon as though she were my Superior General, and dismissed me, feeling very much smaller than when I went in.

When she was ill in bed, the whole house rejoiced. An extraordinary feeling of relief was

felt all through the house. Not a word was said, but the atmosphere was like a clean spring morning compared to a "London Particular."

Poor thing, yet she wanted so much to be loved and respected.

She was scheming and plotting to become Assistant to the Reverend Mother, with an eye to taking her place as Superior ultimately. So she was most terribly upset when a Spanish sister was named to be Assistant. She shut herself up in her room for days, sulking.

I was glad to have the new Assistant. She was well born, spoke English perfectly, was comparatively young, about forty, and was fairly broad-minded. The old Mother was breaking up, and needed someone to help her in the administration of affairs. But it was sad to see how she allowed herself to be prejudiced against the Assistant by the Head Mistress. The latter did everything in her power to distort everything that the former said or did. She hinted that she was trying to oust the Mother. I was accused of taking sides against the Mother, whose pet I had been up to now. She came to actively dislike me. This was a real sorrow to me, for I had been quite devoted to her and she had been glad

of my filial affection and grown to lean on me for all kinds of things.

She was terrified of thunderstorms, so that whenever I could I used to go to her room to comfort her. I would find her huddled up in a corner, with her face to the wall, shaking with fear. I used to take her down to a funny, dark room under the stairs, where we would find assembled half a dozen of the other distraught sisters, saying their beads, crossing themselves every time there was a peal of thunder, making innumerable genuflections. There I would leave her—secure.

Now she had only cold stares for me, suspicious looks. I hardly dared to approach her.

What an appalling evil jealousy is! It leads to more unkindness and suffering than any other vice—suffering to the subject and to the object of it.

This Convent seemed tainted with it. It seemed to ooze from the very walls. As long as I remained a novice, I seemed to escape a good deal of notice, but later on I had to bear so much from the jealousy of those about me that sometimes I felt I could endure no more.

I suppose that ambition, vanity, party politics creep in everywhere. Then, too, the narrow, hemmed-in life we led, with so little outlet, conduced to pettiness and meanness.

Most monks can, when they are fed up, put on their hats and go out and visit a sick parishioner, or go for a walk and get distraction. They have the same vows as a nun, but they have any amount of liberty.

Despite all this, I was still very happy spiritually. I applied myself diligently to the acquisition of the virtues of humility, patience, gentleness, and to the full accomplishment of my vows.

I had obtained permission from the Mother, when yet in favour, to remain in the Chapel for an hour every evening after Office, when the other sisters had gone to bed. I used to go out with them, and return when they had all disappeared.

I had some wonderful hours as I knelt in the dim Chapel, lit only by the tiny red lamp before the Altar. They made up for a good deal. Alone, in the dark, one seemed to creep in closer to the Sacred Presence, to be one with Him.

Then I was found out by one or two, and they joined me in my vigils. One Lent, several of us joined forces in endeavouring to practise the Rule with absolute perfection. We added many penances to the regular ones. I obtained permission from the Spanish Assistant, in whose spiritual charge I now was more or less, to wear a girdle somewhat like the bracelet I described before. It was about a quarter of a yard wide, with spikes on the inner side, and was made to be worn round the waist. I used to put it on when I got up at 5 a.m., and remove it, thankfully I must acknowledge, at 8.30 a.m., before I went to the School. It certainly was penitential. Every movement I made was agony at first, but gradually it hurt a little less. We got a hair shirt sent to us from the Carmelites, who make them and sell them. But there is no comparison. A hair shirt is a joke, and a rather smelly one if worn much, because it cannot be washed.

By the time Easter came I was like a piece of chewed string, and I guess the others were too. We used to make the Way of the Cross every day in a side Chapel, carpeted with cocoanut matting, with our arms in the form of a cross all the time, and with bare knees going round on

the aforesaid matting. It is an excruciating position, literally, if prolonged for any length of time. I do most sincerely think that the few of us did these things from the purest and most perfect motives ; I do not think that there was a spark of spiritual vanity or self-complacency about us. But I know now that it was a grave mistake to afflict our tender, fragile bodies so severely.

I was glad when the first summer holidays arrived. My strength had been severely taxed, and I think I should have had a breakdown if things had not been eased up somewhat.

The greater part of the time I spent with the Assistant and another little sister overhauling the mattresses on which the children slept. We carried them down innumerable flights of stairs on our backs to the garden, where we beat them, aired them, and carried them upstairs again. It was frightfully exhausting. The children's play-room became our work-room. Here I learned to unmake and remake mattresses. A couple of pupils, who had no homes and remained at School for the vacations, teased the wool. When they were present we were allowed to talk, if we could find the breath and the energy. It is an exhaust-

ing business that of buttoning mattresses, pricking one's fingers with the long skewer-like needle, and struggling to make it penetrate the newly-teased wool.

In an interlude one day I sat down at the piano and played the "Grand March of the Fleas," which hopped about and tortured us. With a slight stretch of the imagination you could picture them processing round the room.

But this work was much too fatiguing for delicate women ; we used to tremble with exhaustion after a strenuous morning at it. The Assistant vowed that never again would it be allowed. A lay sister should be charged to remake the beds one at a time the year round, not all together in a month.

One day we heard that the Head Mistress was going with another sister to Paris. How we thanked God under our breath, and how fervently we prayed that she might never come back. She never did.

Meantime the children returned to School to find a new Head Mistress in the Assistant, and I her underling and representative. Things went very happily. There was no hitch in the School. No more spying and listening at keyholes. I

had a free hand, for the Assistant trusted me utterly.

I had been almost two years in this Convent and began to wonder when I should hear something about my last vows. My time of probation was almost up. Should I have been found worthy to pronounce those vows? All kinds of doubts and fears surged through me at this time—of my unfitness, of my unworthiness.

Then suddenly one day I was sent for and told by the Mother that I was to go into retreat immediately, that I was to make my vows in five days' time. As I had already made a ten days' retreat during the recent holidays, it was thought that five days would suffice to prepare me for the great event. Besides, I could not be spared from the School.

It is an impressive ceremony that of the taking of the last vows. In essentials it does not vary much from that of the first vows, but one striking feature of it is when the novice prostrates in the middle of the Choir and is covered by the big black pall, whilst the big candelabra are placed around it and the choir sings the "De Profundis" over the sister who is dying to the World and its vanities and temptations.

The priest chants prayers for the dead and absolutions ; then at last he bids the sister rise from the dead to lead a new, divine life.

The children, who had never seen this ceremony, were deeply impressed, and told me afterwards that they were terrified lest I should die beneath the awful pall. How I wish I had. It would have been such an easy way out.

CHAPTER X.

FOR some little time I had been seeing visitors from outside occasionally. Our chaplain had sent several women to me for instruction in the Catholic religion, and they had been received into the Church in our little Chapel. Then they had brought their friends to see me. I had but little time for them, but I could usually count on an hour or so on Sunday.

A priest who had been staying for some time at the Monastery hard by got to know me too, and often he would come and ask to see me. As he was a great man, a famous preacher, thinker and writer, none of the sisters could make out why he should want to chat with a young novice. I do not know myself, but I greatly enjoyed his visits, during which we would discuss literature, life, religion. He was very simple and boyish in spite of all his learning, and absolutely charming to me.

I begged him to preach to us, and after much entreaty he promised to come once a week for

a few minutes in the evening and talk to us ; he said he did not know how to preach.

He would put a chair just inside the Altar rails, sit down and stretch out his long legs, and talk. But, alas ! someone had to look after the children—they were hardly ever left alone—and being the youngest in the Community, I was naturally told off to do so. I heard only one sermon. He was furious when he found out that I was not there, and told me he had consented to come only because of me. Possibly the sacrifice—and it was a very real one—did me more good than the sermons would have done. *Quien sabe?*

It was stimulating to come into contact with such an intelligence. Here was I teaching, digging out of my own mind—well furnished in the past, perhaps, but with no new fertiliser being put into its soil—for material. Our library was very small. Of modern books we had none. Newspapers, magazines, reviews were taboo. How keep our teaching up-to-date? Of course we did not do so.

My Stepmother sent me a great case of my college books, and of the standard authors and classics.

The children's library consisted of books by G. A. Henty, Rosa Mulholland, Florence Montgomery—awful. Imagine the joy when *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Virginians*, Dickens were available. Every Saturday afternoon and evening the girls were allowed to read under my *régime*. They used to mob me, literally, for the new books. Hitherto they had not cared to read, but they quickly acquired a taste for it, and in the holidays would get a stock of books from the list I had given to them and bring them back to school to exchange with the fellow-pupils.

These children of mine were extraordinarily musical. As I taught singing and the violin to several of them, I used to get up concerts and invite the sisters to them. It gave the performers confidence and the sisters some distraction from their monotonous life.

In the winter evenings, so as to give them exercise, I would insist on them dancing for at least half an hour. There was a fine harmonium and a good piano in the playroom. We used to place the two instruments one beside the other. I would take the Alexandre harmonium and a child the piano, one or two would fetch their violins, and we would play dance music in great

style. It was good fun. They learnt all kinds of dances, from the valse to a Highland reel, an Irish jig to a Spanish "jota."

Then they would implore me to sing to them, and most evenings I would do so, in French, in Italian, in German. I had a first-class accompanist, and it was a real joy to me. Poor throat, how hardly treated: teaching nearly all day, singing in the Choir, saying Office in one tone (the most trying of all exercises), reading aloud in the Refectory.

But we were at this time a happy family. Often we would gather round in a big circle and talk together about abstruse things—"Life, Death, and the Great Hereafter." How I loved them all, those bairns of mine, although on their account I was perpetually in hot water. It was wrong for them to be so devoted to me. They ought to like all the nuns in precisely the same degree, not one more than another.

I remember once telling a priest, a Jesuit, in confession that I was afraid the children were too fond of me. (I had had it so drilled into me that it was that I began to believe it.)

"Do you love them?"

"Oh, yes, Father."

“ Well, then, of course they love you, and a good thing, too. Don’t you worry about that, sister.”

It has always seemed to me that by love and kindness you can get people to do almost anything. You can influence them in no other way. By severity and by putting the fear of God into decent people nothing can be achieved.

I think one of the reasons why the children loved me was that they felt I was a woman with a personality and individuality, as well as a nun. Of course I was supposed to have sunk all that long ago. I ought to have been moulded to pattern by this time, all the overflowing edges trimmed off and smoothed down. But I maintain that it is for grace to build on top of Nature’s foundations, not to destroy them. Natural virtues are God’s own gifts, not vices, as so many religious people make them out to be. No one is built exactly like his neighbour. Why, therefore, should people in religion be expected to conform themselves to a certain pattern? It is demanding an impossibility of most people.

My strong character used to come out in my handwriting. It was too manly. Even the Superior General complained that it was not the

100 The Killing of a Vocation

writing of a nun, and told me I must change it. Meekness and mildness, not virility, must characterise a religion.

How petty and insignificant such things seem and are, but I have come to the conclusion that in every assemblage of women or men, the Suffragettes, the House of Commons, the Army, you find the same pettiness and niggling over things that do not matter.

I remember once being told that I walked like the Grand Pasha. "Try to walk with more humility." I had a flash of temper, and asked if she would like me to go on all fours. The mere fact of thinking how one walked made one self-conscious. But you were never left alone ; you were eternally being picked over like a hen does a dung-heap.

"Why do you sit with your head on one side in Chapel? It looks so affected, as though you were posing as a Saint."

"Why do you put so much expression into the solos you sing in Chapel? It is not religious or seemly," and so on eternally.

CHAPTER XI.

NOT long after my profession the Superior was sent for from Headquarters, and the Assistant took entire charge of the House. This meant that she had a good deal more to do in the Community. So that I also took over the School entirely.

I also gave her a hand in the Economat. She was no good at accounts, and they were in a hopeless state of muddle. The entire income of the Convent was very little over £1000 a year, yet we found that the butcher was getting £300 out of it. The children and nuns were poorly fed, the children particularly. Something had to be done. I suggested as a beginning that we should reduce the meat bill and change our butcher, who had so evidently been battenning on us for so long. His meat was cagmag. I thought that we ought to be able to get it wholesale from Glasgow, so sent for prices, and before long had reduced the bill by half and got more and far better meat.

The grocer was charging us top prices, not store prices. I sent for him, and insisted that if he could not come to terms we should give our custom elsewhere. He soon gave in, and so did the other tradesfolk.

I used to write a number of letters to the parents, to priests.

Then our Mother General came to us for a sort of pastoral visit, the first I had experienced.

The object of such visits was to ascertain how the Convent was going from a spiritual and a temporal point of view. Each sister was interviewed alone. The Superior had received a report of each one of us from the Mother, so knew all our peccadilloes. She scolded us, called us over the coals, encouraged us, listened to complaints and confidences, questioned us about our inner life, and so on. She visited the School, inspected the accounts (what long hours I spent when all the house slept to get them at all right that first time), received the Chaplain and other visitors.

I had the deepest reverence and affection for her, and it was a great joy to see her again. When I went to her for my private talk, I went in fear and trembling, for I knew that several

sisters had their knives in me. However, she received me most affectionately, thanked me for all I had been to the Assistant, who, she said, was now to be our Superior.

She said I had proved myself to be a true nun, obedient, humble, trustworthy, with a good spirit, that she was extremely pleased with me. I was to go on being the right hand of the Mother, and I was to be in charge of the School.

I was literally overwhelmed by her praise. It made me very happy. To me it was God's Voice speaking through her.

At the end of her visit she announced in full Chapter that she had nominated the Assistant as Superior, and that she felt sure that we should prove ourselves to be obedient, affectionate daughters. She said she regretted to have to retire the former Mother, but that it was thought advisable that she should remain at the Mother-House on account of her failing health.

Many of us were delighted to have our new Mother. Others pretended to be so, but were not, for they knew that she was severe and would expect the strict observance of the Rule. They had carped at her and criticised her whilst she had been Assistant, as far as they dared, and by

their spiteful tales to the Superior General had hoped to prevent her nomination.

Fortunately she knew the characters with whom she had to deal, and had entire confidence in the new Mother, who had spent the greater part of her religious life under her eye.

Just before she left, she sent for me again and told me that some of the sisters complained that I was too attached of the new Mother, and that I saw too much of her.

In future, I must not see her in private unless it was absolutely necessary, once a month perhaps. She knew that as a novice I had needed her guidance, but that now that I was fully professed, I must, for the sake of "the weaker vessels," be with her as little as possible.

CHAPTER XII.

I HAD been under the impression that all the Choir sisters in the Order were drawn from the better classes. The Rule ordained that this should be. So that it had come as a severe shock to me to find that the majority in this Convent were very far from being well bred. They had acquired some sort of veneer in the Novitiate, but a very slight scratch showed the poor material beneath. I discovered that most of them were petty tradespeople's daughters from provincial towns. At first I had no idea of it, and it is more than likely that I may have put my foot into it pretty heavily before I knew the true state of affairs.

But on the surface, we got on together extremely well. There were some quaint characters among them.

One, I recollect, an Austrian, aged 75 or so, used to have her petticoats padded out with brown paper, so as to create the effect of a

106 **The Killing of a Vocation**

crinoline, which had been in vogue at the time she entered, I imagine.

She used to tell the children that she was a Princess ; they all believed her, and people from the village used to ask after the foreign princess. As a matter of fact she was of quite humble origin, but her Father's cottage had been called " Schonbrunn," so she called herself " Josefina von Schonbrunn, Prinzessin."

She had conceived a passion for reading the books of Mrs. Henry Wood, and if she could unlawfully get hold of one she was happy for months reading and re-reading. " She describes the High Life so beautifully, does she not? " she said to me one day.

She, poor lady, did not realise that she was getting old. She begged one of the children to take a snapshot of her ; when she saw the finished copy, she almost screamed with rage. " It is not me, it is not me. You have done it on purpose." She would not believe that ravaged, line-riddled face could be hers.

She took great care of her complexion, and managed to obtain buttermilk from the dairy wherewith to bathe her face every night. One day, during the holidays, I was sitting writing in

my cell. On hearing a great commotion at the end of the corridor, and being curious, I went to see what it was about. I found every bit of furniture turned out of the old lady's cell, whilst two men, watched by several sisters, were taking up the boards. The old lady kept darting in and out, shaking her fists at the men and the sisters, who took not the least notice. I remembered that some remarks had been made about a bad smell that emanated from her cell, and that possibly a dead mouse or rat might be the cause of it. Every board in the room was taken up, but nothing was discovered. The few bits of furniture were replaced, when suddenly one of the men who was carrying the washstand gave a yell.

“ Golly, here's the smell ! Take a sniff at that there sponge, why, it's alive.”

And sure enough it was the sponge, reeking of a concentrated odour of ancient and stinking butterfat.

If the old lady liked you, she jabbered to you in a queer mixture of French, German and English. If she did not like you, whenever she met you in the corridors she would spit like a cat as she passed, till you were well out of sight. I incurred her displeasure, after having been

108 **The Killing of a Vocation**

prime favourite for a long time. She was always asking for lovely white wool, which also cost a lovely price. The poor soul confectioned pretty baby coats and socks with it, but no one in a convent has any use for such things. As we were poor and hard put to it to make both ends meet, the Mother told me that I was to refuse to buy any more wool for her. I was awfully sorry. How she spat at me ever after !

She gave a few music lessons to the babies, poor little souls. She placed their fingers on the right notes they had to play, and poked at them with a long knitting needle if they played the wrong ones.

Hers was a sad, lonely life. She never came to recreation, she refused to do so, except when the Mother General was there. She did not keep the Rule in any sort of way, but led her own life.

We had a sister sent to us from the London House for a time, who gave me many a hearty laugh. She hated the cold, poor soul, and would muffle herself up in every possible and impossible garment. We were allowed to wear a thick woollen cape beneath the guimpe and veil, so long as it did not show. This was not enough

for her. So she made herself an extra one of thick double cloth interlined with cotton wool. She was already pretty unwieldy and bulky, but now she looked enormous. She managed to obtain some red flannel pants from somewhere or another, and they were made long enough to enable her to tuck them inside her boots. The effect was ludicrous when she turned her habit up. The children made huge fun of old "red-breeches," as they dubbed her.

She would come into the Community room at night, at the precise moment when she was supposed to replace a sister in the School, take a chair, put it right into the fireplace, sit on it, and jam her feet on the bars. Then she would call me to her, and say : " Sister dear, will you be so sweet as to take my hot bottle to my cell for me? Just roll it up in my nightgown, and if the bed isn't made pull up the clothes for me, like an angel."

Such a cell ! At 8 p.m. everything just as she had left it at 5 a.m. After twenty years of religious life she had not learned to be clean and tidy, or punctual . . . or many other things.

At this time we had a sister dying of cancer. She slept just above me, or shall I say rather did

110 **The Killing of a Vocation**

not sleep. For over a year my nights were haunted by the incessant whimpering of the poor sufferer. Nothing could be done for her, so that it was a great relief when she died. It used to break my heart to see her craving for her medicine, which had morphia in it. She was allowed to have it only when the pain was unbearable. But how often her wistful eyes would turn to the bottle, placed well beyond her reach. It was not considered right to alleviate the pain too much. Her suffering came from God, so must be endured heroically ! What she must have suffered, mentally as well as physically !

I knelt beside her in her last agony, and thanked God when the awful rattle ceased and I knew she could agonize no longer.

The room in which she had been martyred was thoroughly distempered and the floor scrubbed ; the bedding was removed and burnt. But the sisters avoided that room as though it had the plague. They would walk all round the house rather than pass it.

We were very short of accommodation just then, and the room could not remain empty. But no one would go into it. I was not at all frightened, and offered to occupy it.

The Killing of a Vocation III

The first night as I lay in bed, a lighted candle on a small stand beside me, I could see my shadow reflected on the wall. I put my hands like the dead nun's had been when she was laid out, and thought that I too should be dead some day, perhaps in that very room. . . . Well, Death was the beginning of Life. I should not mind dying at all.

Then I fell asleep. But suddenly I awoke in a cold sweat, my short hair standing on end, my heart thumping madly. "Tap, tap, tap, tap," I heard, like one piece of iron striking on another, somewhere on the bed. . . . I prayed, made the sign of the Cross, as soon as I had the strength to move at all. I was petrified. . . . Then, suddenly, I was overpowered by the most awful stench of cancer, a great gust of it seemed breathed into me. I could feel it positively go right inside me.

At last the tapping ceased, and I lay and shivered for hours, praying for the repose of the nun's soul.

For weeks, without a single night's intermission, these things occurred, never at the same hour. Sometimes I had only just got into bed,

112 **The Killing of a Vocation**

and was still sitting up when the tapping began. After the first night I had taken the straw palliasse from the iron bedstead, thinking that perhaps a key was attached to the bed, and had made the noise whenever I moved. But hunt about for an explanation as I might, there was nothing to account for it. In the daytime the smell was not noticeable, but at night, in spite of a wide open window, the awful stench continued to overpower me.

After some months I was put back into my cell, and for a long time the room remained unoccupied. But some years later a new sister, who had not been with us more than a few months, came to me one day (I was Econome) and said that something was the matter with her bed. She had not liked to make a fuss before, being a newcomer, but she could not sleep. Would I do something.

Now, she was sleeping in another wing of the house ; she could not have heard about my experience, for the only person to whom I had related it was the Mother, who had counselled me to keep it dark. I asked the sister to explain herself. She said that at different times of the night she was awakened by the most uncanny tapping

on her bed. Last night, she said, she had risen from her bed, and sitting at the end of it had watched for the cause of the noise.

“ Very queer,” said I. “ I will have the bed removed.” I called the lay sister and told her to see to it at once. It was to be taken to bits and removed to the attics.

Now this sister had heard the Choir sister complain about the bed and thought it was pure imagination, so played a trick on her. She took the bed to bits, taking good care that the other should see her do it, and carried it off. Then she returned with the selfsame bed, and proceeded to put it up.

“ There now, sister, I’ll wager you’ll sleep this night.”

The following morning the victim of the joke arrived to see me in a fine rage. The tapping had been worse than ever, and she had been sitting up all night. I must say I was amazed. I sent for the lay sister, who explained what she had done. I had to call her over the coals, but I was highly amused and interested. I condemned the bed utterly after this. . . . It is impossible to account for this affair. I have no explanations to offer. The smell one could

114 **The Killing of a Vocation**

understand, the room had not been properly disinfected—but the tapping?

We had Masses said for the repose of the dead nun's soul, as we thought she might be trying to tell us she needed prayers.

My priest-friend had named the portress "Cerberus," and with very good reason, for she was one of the ugliest, most forbidding human beings I have ever seen. Very short and square in build, with a big head, she squinted from under black bushy eyebrows. She had a battered, wide-nostrilled nose, a mouth from ear to ear filled in places with great yellow fangs, and was profusely moustached and bearded. But she had a comical smile, and a heart of gold.

She was Irish, and worshipped St. Patrick, the Frenchman. She had a picture of him in a little box of a room off the hall door. Into this room she would hustle Protestant and Catholic alike. Down on their knees would they have to go, and "ask a blessing of the great St. Pathrick." So terrified of the hideous old lay sister were they, that they generally complied without remonstrance.

For hours she would kneel in a side Chapel, saying her beads. On the eve of a feast, when

the Sacristan decorated the Altar, she would forget to genuflect each time she passed the Tabernacle. The old sister would then rise noisily from her place in the side Chapel and genuflect, and call attention to the poor Sacristan's omission by a loud snort.

She gradually became very ill, and could no longer guard the portals of the Convent, and at last she was put into the room where the sister had died of cancer.

You would meet her sometimes in the late afternoon wandering along the cell corridors with an enormous nightcap on her head, a nightgown up to her knees, bare hairy legs showing beneath, and the cutest red flannel coat which came down to her waist. She looked more like the Wolf in Red Riding Hood than anything else.

One day I was having a cup of tea in the Refectory when she came and sat in her place on a bench beside me. Another sister sat opposite us on the other side of the room, and outside in the corridor was the sister Infirmarian painting something red. "Cerberus" was eating some stodgy currant bun, the last thing on earth that she should have eaten, for I believe she had no digestive organs left, when all of a sudden she

116 **The Killing of a Vocation**

gave a great scream, and had I not stretched out my arm to catch her, she would have fallen with all her weight on to the ground. The sister opposite bolted upstairs, the one outside bolted in, still brandishing the paint-brush, and came to my assistance. She plentifully daubed our veils with red paint, which in my fright I took to be blood, when suddenly "Cerberus" came to, made a dash for the door, and also bolted upstairs, where she was very ill.

The priest and doctor were sent for. She was put to bed. Her feet were discovered to be very much in need of washing. The Infirmarian arrived with a bowl of hot water and soap. But "Cerberus" feared water as she feared the devil, and while the sister made a grab at a foot to try to get off the worst dirt of ages for the priest's anointing, the other drew it up and yelled lustily. I fear the padre must have received the shock of his life when he came to anoint those rebellious members, but I do not suppose the Lord Almighty minded the dirt.

A little later another old lay sister, almost blind, came into the room and went fumbling to the bed, feeling about. "Cerberus" made one spring from the bed, snatched up a clasp knife,

with which she had been wont to peel potatoes, and chased the prowler out of the room, which done, she firmly closed the door and wedged the knife in between the cracks.

When she was well enough, she used to read to us in the Refectory. It was a huge joke to hear her extremely Irish brogue and her quaint pronunciation of words.

She had a most peaceful end. One morning she said to the sister who was nursing her that she would like a cup of tea. Then she asked that the fire in her room might be lighted so that the room should be warm before the Superior was called. At 5.45 she said she thought the time had come. I went in to see her just before Mass, and found her sitting up in bed. She gave me a sweet smile. Then the Mother came in.

“ It’s good of yez to come and see me this early, Mother. But it’s good-bye I’ll be saying to yez.”

She kissed the Mother’s hand, stroked mine, lay back in bed, closed her eyes, and was dead.

An extraordinary thing is death. I have seen it so often, yet I have never got used to the thought that I too shall die.

118 **The Killing of a Vocation**

It is the custom in most religious orders for the coffin to be of plain deal, very roughly put together, but up here in Scotland our undertaker, who was also the village carpenter, used to cover the coffin with white linen.

I helped to dress the sister and to lay her in her coffin. She looked so peaceful, her poor, ugly old face had taken on such a majestic expression that I almost envied her. "After life's fitful fever," she slept well. Her task was done, and well done, and she had gone to seek her reward.

The open coffin was taken to the Chapel and placed on stools in the middle of the Choir, with the great candelabra placed around it. The Office for the Dead was sung that night, and we took it in turns to watch throughout the night. Rather a gruesome vigil, in the dark Chapel, lit only by the six yellow candles and the light of the Sanctuary lamp. But one seemed to get up very close to the naked reality of things, of life, in that solemn hour.

Early next morning a requiem was sung, and then the coffin was closed. I used to hate that part of the ceremony. The Mother would approach, and in the case of a lay sister place a lace handkerchief over the face, in the case of a

Choir sister, the veil, usually folded back, would be drawn down. Then the men would nail down the lid—horrible.

The lay sisters helped to bear the coffin, followed by the Community, down to the little cemetery on which I looked so often from my cell window. But in winter it was very damp there and, although the men had spent hours baling out the water, we had to put the coffin into two feet of it at least. It was revolting to hear the coffin go plop into it with a splash.

Another lonely soul gone to God. The religious life is a supremely lonely one.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT recreation one day we were told that a new sister was coming to join us, an Englishwoman.

I happened to have been asked privately about her some time before. The Mother had told me that she had been asked to receive the sister as she was not getting on at all well in her present house. Did I know her, or anything of her, and if so what did I think about her.

"Oh, yes, Mother. I know her slightly. She was in Paris when I was there, and although she was a Professed Nun then, I happened to see a good deal of her in the School. I think she is all right, rather slangy and rough, but at any rate a lady."

We needed another sister for the School badly. I was doing the work of three people just then, and was getting very nervy and irritable at times.

Before she had been made Superior, the Mother had given a good many lessons. Now

she had no time for that, so I had had to take them on.

The sister arrived, very much on the defensive, for she felt she had come to us under a cloud. We did our best to put her at her ease, and were very friendly and nice to her. I gave her a few lessons with the younger children, and after a week or so she settled down and looked happy.

Things went along swimmingly for six months ; we were on excellent terms when we came up against one another ; she was always ready to fall in with any suggestion I made with regard to her work in the School. She was devoted to the Mother. But I noticed that the children did not take to her at all. I could not make out why, for she was jolly and bright.

Then, suddenly, I got nothing but black looks from her. She would not speak to me, and sulked with the Mother. One day I cornered her, and begged her to tell me what was the matter. Had I offended her in any way ? If so, it was quite unintentional, as I had nothing but kind thoughts of her in my mind. Not a word could I get out of her. She had a swarthy complexion, a face cut out of granite, and when she scowled she was a most unprepossessing customer to tackle.

I humbled myself to her, asked her to forgive me if I had in any way offended her. At long last she growled out that it was all right, and sloped off.

For a week or so she seemed brighter. Then down came the thunder clouds blacker than ever.

Of course, I had told the Mother of our interview. She and I were in the most perfect relations as mother and daughter. She knew my heart and mind as God knew them.

In class one day one of my children stood up and said she was sorry to have to tell me that the girls did not approve of the new sister. She had been saying things about me, calculated to undermine my influence and to withdraw their affection from me.

“Of course, we simply told her to mind her own business. We told her we knew you, and that nothing on earth would alter our opinion of you. So don’t be surprised, Sister, if she complains of our having been rude. We’re all mixed up in it.”

It was her first and last attempt to influence the pupils against me, but she went about among the sisters, hinting all kinds of things. “Why should that young sister be Reverend Mother’s

right hand? Were there not heaps of other sisters much older and more suitable for the position? ”

I often came across her whispering in corners to different sisters, with a malignant glance at me as I passed by.

This was a most flagrant breach of the Rule. It is forbidden to criticise those in authority, such as the Superior, the Head Mistress; it is forbidden to talk *à deux* ever, and doubly so in the silence. Any sister found guilty of criticising her superiors could be shown to the door of the Convent.

There were, alas ! many who were glad to cavil and to criticise. They knew that I was the other half of the delicate Superior, who used me to do many things she herself could not do on account of her ill-health. They hated my docility, my usefulness, my status in the School. So they were glad to impute all kinds of motives to me—pride, ambition, vanity, I know not what besides.

They discussed me with the Chaplain, who used to talk about me in the drawing-rooms in the village where he visited. I heard this from my friends, who, knowing me, sided with me. But

it was a bitter humiliation to know I was the subject of conversation outside. After all I could not help being in the position I had been placed in by the Superior General. But she, too, was criticised, and found wanting. Had it not been for the Mother I should have implored Mother General to remove me, but I could not leave her in the lurch.

The annual retreat came along. I plunged into it gladly, for I felt wretched in this atmosphere of suspicion and jealousy. I hoped it would clear the air somewhat. I spent my days in Chapel, in a retired corner, away from the eyes of others. But Reverend Mother routed me out one day, and took me to her room.

"What am I to do with Sister X? She is not making the retreat at all. She refused to go to the sermons until I gave her an obedience to do so, and now she flings herself into and out of the Chapel like a wild woman."

I suggested that she should put her on her knees and give her such a talking to as she had never yet had in her life.

I returned to the Chapel, and forgot all about everything and everybody.

An hour later, again the Mother came to me.

126 The Killing of a Vocation

“You must come to my room at once, she wants to ask your pardon.”

“Oh, Mother, I can’t stand that. . . .”

“Nonsense, you must come at once.”

In fear and trembling, hating the ordeal intensely, I was led like a lamb to the slaughter to the Mother’s room. I fell on my knees (according to regulations) before Sister X, who, weeping passionate tears on my immaculate guimpe, confessed that she had been playing the devil’s part, that she had tried to make the children hate me, that she had been to every sister saying the unkindest, most untrue things about me, that she was furiously jealous of me, and now seeing the error of her ways implored me to forgive her.

I had not a scrap of ill-feeling for the poor soul, and told her so. We embraced, as nuns always do, by placing one’s ear against the other’s head—first on one side, then on the other. And I returned to Chapel.

That afternoon there was a fine sermon on Charity. I fancy the padre had got an inkling of how things were in the confessional, and he let us have it straight from the shoulder.

But my appreciation of it was much marred by

the fact that poor Sister X came and sat beside me, took one of my hands, an action most abhorrent to me at the best of times, for I loathe being touched, and wept and blubbered the whole sermon through, squeezing my poor member from time to time, as some point made by the preacher more particularly applied to her. Added to this, it was a hot summer's day, and my neighbour was not addicted to frequent bathing. . . . In the name of Charity I suffered considerably that day.

A fortnight after the retreat things were just as bad as ever.

For several years now I had endured and borne, as patiently as I could, criticism and jealousy and the fruits thereof. I again told the Mother that I had had enough of it. But she begged me for her sake to do nothing, not to ask for an exchange. Unfortunately, I had never written or complained to the Superior General about it. Other sisters bombarded her with complaints and tales, but somehow never could I bring myself to do that sort of thing.

Letters to her were closed by the writer, and had to be sent without question. I was accused at this time of having intercepted a letter and of

128 **The Killing of a Vocation**

having burnt it. There was a fearful hullabaloo. I could only say that I had not done so, and the Mother the same, but I lived under the cloud of that accusation for a long time.

Then one day Sister X's brother came to see her. He spent most of the day talking to her. Then he asked to see the Mother, and told her that he intended taking his sister away then and there. That, however, the Mother refused to allow.

A week later she went off to London, and left the Order immediately. How it was arranged I do not know.

Many of us were unfeignedly glad to see the back of her.

That year was in one way the happiest of my religious life. Awed by the departure of Sister X, the disaffected spirits pulled themselves together somewhat, and left me, exteriorly at any rate, in peace.

There was a most delightful set of girls in the school, many of them had been there all the years I had. We worked hard, played hard, and prayed hard. They loved their lessons, and I enjoyed giving them as much as they liked having them.

The minds of the young are like musical instruments from which lovely harmonies may be drawn by skilful fingers. It is entrancing to lead these minds along enchanting avenues disclosing wondrous vistas in the far distance of the sublime and beautiful. To set their feet in the right paths, to unfold to them the secrets of life, the wonders of art and literature.

I sometimes told them that we were too happy, that it was too good to last. I knew quite well that it was to be my last term with them. One has these premonitions.

We had several months left to us though, and I did all in my power to make them as perfect as they could be.

It was a wonderfully lovely spring and summer. At recreation instead of playing, I used to take them for long rambles, over the hills and far away, where we never met a human being. The lambs were gambolling and frisking, and the may-trees were white with blossom. I used to make them see pictures everywhere to cultivate the seeing eye.

We got up plays, funny ones generally. I never could stand the usual sentimental pious ones, and we gave some very good shows. It

130 **The Killing of a Vocation**

was hard work for me, for I often wrote the play, produced it, made the costumes, made up each face, and prompted. Often I painted the scenery and fixed it up. The children loved it, and it was good training for them. The nuns liked to come to the shows too. So I was amply repaid for my pains. Several of my pupils are actresses to-day and, moreover, on the London stage.

But the end had to come. When I bade them farewell I knew that it was for good, but I took good care not to tell them so.

I had tried to make them valiant, trustworthy souls, fine Christian women and future Mothers, and I had tried to cultivate their minds and to give them a thirst for knowledge and a real love for literature.

I loved them all deeply, devotedly, and my heart bled when I sometimes thought of the surely coming sacrifice.

CHAPTER XIV.

BEFORE proceeding further, I think I should perhaps record some of the spiritual experiences I had gone through since my Profession.

Up to now I have shown only the ease with which I prayed and meditated, the happiness I enjoyed in the purely spiritual life. It is easy to describe all that, but how to write of the awful desolation, the black pits in which one seemed to be engulfed, the agony of spiritual loneliness, when one knocks at the doors of Heaven to find them shut in one's face.

I shudder even to-day at the remembrance of certain periods when my soul seemed to have gone down into Hell.

If you can imagine a soul, or mind, racked and thumbscrewed and torn with red-hot pincers, then slowly dismembered—entrails torn out, heart left in till the last moment and then pierced with a dagger—you may get some idea of what I underwent. At such times, recurring every three months, my mind became a blank, and I felt desolate indeed. God had seemingly abandoned me.

132 **The Killing of a Vocation**

Then suddenly the cloud would lift, and my bruised and battered soul would slowly recover.

At other times there would seem to be but the thinnest of veils between Him and me. He would make up to me for the agony endured. I do not profess to understand God's treatment of souls, why He should allow them to be tortured, except to test the strength of their love. No earthly Spouse is ever loved as some nuns love their Heavenly Spouse. No man is ever given the heart, soul, body and mind as a good nun gives to God. Every natural desire, every fibre of the heart, every personal comfort, pleasure, amenity, satisfaction is sacrificed for His Sake . . . love, children abandoned, intellect abased, ambition quelled. And yet, in spite of all this, God more frequently than not seems to turn a deaf ear to your complaints, to ignore you utterly, to respond never.

All this is very difficult to write about, so I touch but lightly on it all.

Towards the end of my time in Scotland I was often irritable and impatient. Physically, I was worn out by hard work, mentally I was goaded and worried by the enmity of several of the least fervent of the nuns. I felt bitter when I thought

of them working so quietly, so surreptitiously to get me out of the house. Why should I be sacrificed for the sake of peace? The Mother General knew perfectly well that none of those working against me was a good religious, but because she had nowhere else to send them, I must turn out.

My Superior dared not protest ; she was afraid to.

Towards the end of the holidays a letter arrived to say that I was to proceed immediately to one of our Houses in the West of England. Two sisters were being sent to replace me.

For the sake of peace, peace at any price, I was to be sacrificed. The schemers, the petty politicians had won.

Although I had been assured of her approbation by the Superior General, although I was the right hand of the Mother, whose will had always been my law, yet because of the misrepresentations of a handful of dissatisfied, jealous, unoccupied, imperfect religious, I was to be the scapegoat.

It was a confession of weakness, not to be expected of so fine and noble a character.

I felt disgraced, distrusted, a pariah.

CHAPTER XV.

WITH sad and tear-dimmed eyes, I looked out at the landscape as it hurried by. I was fleeing from the home I had loved so well for seven long years.

The Mother and the sisters who cared for me wept bitterly when I bade them farewell.

Well, that episode of my life was over. I must look ahead, find strength for the new burden awaiting me.

A railway journey, better still a sea voyage, is a great help when you have to readjust your life, to find your new bearings. The fatigue, the change of scene, especially to a nun, the bustle, the contact with life seem to put a period, a blank space between the past and the future. This cross-country journey, so long, so wearying, was a godsend in reality.

The Convent where I was going was a large one, consisting of a Community of some fifty sisters and of some two hundred pupils. One or two of the sisters I knew slightly, the Superior I

136 **The Killing of a Vocation**

had come in contact with at the Mother House. She was an Italian, a member of an old Roman family, tall, handsome, rather cold in manner, but with a great heart once you had penetrated beneath the exterior. She was very brilliant, spoke several languages perfectly. She had been an Ambassador's daughter, and had lived in many first-class Embassies before she had entered the Convent at the age of thirty.

I had learnt all this about her in the Novitiate, for we young novices looked on her as rather a romantic figure, and although as a rule the precise rank or position of a nun was sedulously kept secret, circumstances sometimes revealed it.

She gave me a warm and motherly welcome when I arrived late at night, perished with cold, a miserable object. I was fed and warmed and sent to bed ; hard though it was, it was a refuge where I could hide from prying eyes for a time and lick my wounds.

After I had been installed a few days, I learnt that my advent had been looked upon with horror. One of the sisters had been sent up to the House in Scotland as a penance. The Mother and I had felt sorry for the poor old thing, and had gone out of our way to be kind

to her. But she had been buttonholed by the sisters who disliked the Mother and me, and had swallowed all their stories, and retailed them on her return to her own House. She had given me a very bad character.

There had been a good deal of talk about "that woman" when the sisters had heard of my impending arrival, so much so that it had come to the Mother's ears. She rebuked them severely, and said that I was sacrificing my life in leaving the House where I had been so long and had worked so devotedly, and that she counted on the sisters to give me a kindly reception, and to make me feel at home.

Some months later the old sister came to me and told me all this, and begged my pardon for having believed the tales told her in Scotland, and for having repeated them. She said that she knew me now, and realized what a pack of lies had been spread about me. A little late in the day!

But for some months I felt a pariah, a suspect—though of what, God knows.

All this time God hid His face from me utterly. But I endured and fought and prayed and worked. I had far more leisure than I had ever

138 **The Killing of a Vocation**

had before. Among my scanty baggage I had a volume of Browning, which during those days I read from cover to cover, marking the lines I loved, and ruminating them. I dug up many gems of the first water, and found both courage and consolation in these pages.

One day, as I was going to the class for a lesson, a cablegram was handed to me ; I glanced at it as I went into the class-room. It announced the sudden death of my Father. It was a heavy blow, for it was totally unexpected. He was to have come over that Fall to see me for the first time since I had entered.

I gave my lesson as usual. We were very gay, and laughed a good deal at some descriptions I gave, whilst subconsciously my heart ached and grieved bitterly.

The Mother received quite a shock when that evening after recreation I asked for permission to write to my Stepmother, and asked for the sisters' prayers for the repose of my Father's soul. She had glanced at the cable, but its purport had not reached her brain, so had handed it to me quite casually.

Soon after I had settled down somewhat, the Mother sent for me to give her an account of my

conscience, as it was called. It is a fearful ordeal to have to scratch over one's soul like a hen in a cabbage patch, and hand out the results to one's Superior, in spite of having had to do so once a month for so many years. But to a new Mother! However, she put a good number of questions to me, such as, How had I accepted the sacrifice God had asked of me? (I am afraid I privately wondered if God had had any say in the matter. Had it not been manœuvred by malicious tongues? However, God's shoulders are broad fortunately, for everything good, bad, or indifferent rests thereon apparently.)

Had I accepted everything in true humility of spirit? Was I content to take a back seat now after having had such an important position for some years? She went thoroughly into the subject of obedience, pointing out that the slightest wish of a Superior was God's Will manifested to His children. How did I pray? How far advanced was I in the practice of prayer? What methods did I use, and so forth?

"It appears that the children think you are so cold—so stand off. I am always hearing about your coldness, yet, in spite of it, they all like you very much. I think, my child, that there must

be an innate coquetry in you that accounts for this. Guard against it, and do not let the children run after you."

She had a very high idea of the religious life, but somehow, although I respected and liked her, she tortured my soul. Her instructions put me on the rack. They were inhuman. I think that many of the sisters either did not understand them or turned a deaf ear to them, but I know that several others felt as I did.

She went for a short visit to the Mother House after I had been with her for six months, and on her return brought me a personal letter from the Mother General, who wrote that she was very pleased to have such excellent reports of me. I had shown myself to be a true religious, obedient, humble, docile. "It gives me great joy to know this, my dear child."

I was both much touched and grateful. The cloud that had hung over me for so long now seemed dispersed. I no longer felt in disgrace. It was immensely good of her to write thus to me, but I knew, too, that I had to thank the dear Mother who had brought it to me for its inception.

At this time I was in bad health. My heart was queer, I ate nothing, and slept badly. The

little sleep I had was haunted by frightful nightmares. It was the result of years of hard physical and mental work. The strain had been terrific during those last years in Scotland. Now came the reaction. And it was a hard struggle to keep going. My throat had always given me a great deal of trouble, and now it was worse than ever. But I still taught, and sang, and said Office in Choir. As a matter of fact, the singing was a comfort to me. We had a fine organ and the organist was a real musician. It was a joy to be accompanied by her, a joy which overcame the pain it gave me.

The sisters became friendly after sufficient time had elapsed to show them that I was not the ogress they had expected me to be. The little intercourse we had was of the friendliest. But it often occurred that for months we never spoke to half at least of the Community. Either they had duties that took them away part of the hour's recreation morning or evening, or you had. Often, too, one racked one's brains to know what to say. Many a time have I walked round the grounds beside a couple of sisters, the tail-end of the others, cudgelling my brain for something to say that could be said without being better left

unsaid, and at the end of the half-hour not having uttered a word. I was always afraid to be natural, spontaneous, and so were they. We lived perpetually on tenterhooks.

And thus a year flowed by, and at the end of it the then Superior was recalled to the Mother House, and a new one sent in her stead. This new one I had also known in the Novitiate. She was an Englishwoman, really beautiful as a young woman, and had been Superior of the House in Rome, where she had been idolised by the sisters. She had acquired the habit of being made much of, and expected us to fall down and worship from the word go. A good many did, but somehow some of us could not give her more than our respect. Affection is not to be forced.

In our first interview, she fell on my neck and wept copiously. She asked me to be her friend, and to help her not only as a daughter but as a sister. I felt sorry for her, for I, too, knew what it was to leave those one had grown close to. I promised to do whatever I could to help her.

But when I saw many of the, up to now, level-headed sisters behaving like silly schoolgirls, it sickened me, and I retired into my shell.

When I happened to be at recreation, I often

joined the older sisters who could not walk about, and we sat and worked and chatted together. I had usually come from a strenuous game with the children and was quite played out.

But the Mother thought I was not loyal, because I was not surrounding her with the others. Frankly I did not want to be among her adorers, and was glad to be able to absent myself legitimately.

I had a fairly large correspondence at this time. Old pupils wrote for advice, for help. Many I had known for eight years ; nearly all of them were orphans, whom I had placed in good positions, and to whom I was a Mother in every sense of the word.

The Mother called me to her one day, and asked me why I wrote and received so many letters. I told her why.

"I do not see why they should continue to keep up with you. Let them write to the Superior of the House where they were educated."

"But, Mother," I ventured to say, "they do not know her. She is new."

"That does not signify. You will cease writing to them."

144 **The Killing of a Vocation**

I had several women visitors, who came perhaps once a month to see me. They told me their troubles, asked me for my prayers and counsels. Again Reverend Mother wanted to know why they came to see me. I told her.

“ I wish you to know, sister, that when you go to the Parlour, you go as my representative merely, therefore you are in duty bound to repeat to me whatever is told to you there.”

“ That, Reverend Mother, I cannot do. These ladies tell me things in confidence, as though they were in the confessional. I must refuse to repeat their conversations to you.”

“ Very well, then, you will not be allowed to see these persons any more, and for your disobedience to me you will take the discipline during a Miserere every day for a week.”

I must observe that in this case Reverend Mother went beyond her powers. I was told later on by my next Superior that she was wrong, and that I could not reveal to her what had been told to me in confidence.

So there we were at loggerheads. Visitors used to ask for me, but I was always “ engaged in the school.” One or two bolder ones, old pupils, waylaid me on my way to the organ loft.

They had guessed that the Mother was at the bottom of my engagements. Before she had come to us, I was allowed to go to the Parlour as frequently as the Rule allowed. But I could say nothing. I could not put Reverend Mother in the wrong.

One Christmas I had such a bad throat that I could scarcely speak at all, and to sing was pure agony.

I went to her at the obedience and told her that I was afraid I should not be able to sing that night.

“ Oh, my dear, why are you so affected? All this is nothing but affectation. You will sing as usual.”

I did sing somehow. Had I not been well trained, I should not have been able to produce a note, and I sang the following day, but for three months afterwards I was dumb.

Then I got blood poisoning, or a germ. A girl who had a private room had a cat there, and asked me to go and see it, as she could not make out what was the matter with it. I went. The cat was scratching its ear violently. I said at once that it had an abscess in its ear, and as I said it I felt a prick in my own. A few days after I began to have a series of abscesses, first in one

ear, then in the other. As in duty bound, I told the Mother about them. She looked at me, and said nothing. This went on for six weeks. I could not sleep. I suffered excruciatingly.

Then one of the sisters spoke to the Mother, and said that she thought I was very ill, I was so weak I could hardly stand.

I was packed off to see the doctor the next time he came. Then there was a great hullabaloo. He was furious at the way I had been neglected. He sounded me, looked at my throat, shook his head—then he said that I must give up either teaching or saying Office in Choir.

“ I don’t want you to give up teaching, it’s good for you and for the children. You must give up Office, and tell Reverend Mother from me that you are not to go to Choir in future. You are to rest. Your heart is very groggy, too, and I am anxious about you. If you are not very careful, I’ll pack you off to the South of France for good and all, and to do nothing.”

In fear and trembling I went to give an account of this interview to the Mother.

When I told her what he had said about the Office, she looked at me, enraged, and said :
“ You made him say that. He did not say it.”

I was so taken aback that I looked at her, turned on my heel, and stalked off—furious.

I went to Office as usual. But I wrote to the Mother General and told her of the affair, and asked her what I was to do.

A fortnight later Reverend Mother informed me that I was not to say Office in Choir any more.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHEN I had been some six months in this house I was put in charge of a kind of mothers' meeting. Once a week I used to go to a large room at the end of the Convent, away from the sisters' part, and receive women of various ages, from twenty to seventy-five—talk to them, listen to their tales of woe, and give them material assistance when I deemed it expedient.

I kept a kind of shop, where the women would buy chemises, blouses, and so forth at cost price, and I got the materials at manufacturers' prices in the first instance. They would pay twopence or threepence a week till they had worked off the whole cost. In my spare time I used to make up these garments with a small machine I got.

A few prayers were said before and at the end of the meeting. The women liked to come. It did them good to see the nuns and have a talk, they said. I got one or two friends to come and sing to them, such songs as they really liked.

From another friend I borrowed a fine gramophone, which they enjoyed even more.

Some of them would bring their babies, poor wizened little creatures for the most part. They had no one to leave them with at home. I used to hold them in my arms sometimes to give the mothers a rest. I can smell the sickly odour still, sour and stale, that emanated from the sickly little things.

It used to sadden me to hear of the women's fight to keep body and soul together.

One, Phoebe, a pretty young creature, told me she had taken her two little girls by the hand one day, and was on the point of walking into the Serpentine with them, but at the last moment she had not the courage to face death, and had turned back to renew her fight for life.

Another, Agnes, said to me one day :
" Oh, Sister, it's all very well for the priest to keep on telling me to have children. I'm willing enough, but I've got two already, and another coming, and me only twenty-one. But how'm I to feed them. When my husband is in work he only gets a pound a week, and mostly he's not earning nothing."

What can one say to such things?

At Christmas-time they used to have a tree, and for months every moment I had was spent in making thick quilts out of pieces the shopkeepers sent to me, in knitting petticoats and other garments.

A big meal was prepared for their consumption, and some of the Choir sisters would come over to wait on them. Reverend used to come, too, to give the presents.

I remember the last time I was there. I took Agnes's baby into my arms while she went to fetch her present. I happened to turn towards the spot where the Mother sat. Never shall I forget the look of horror on her face when she saw me holding that poor innocent babe. I saw her turn to a sister standing beside her, but I anticipated the command I felt she was sending me, and hurriedly handed the baby to another woman.

Heaven knows the thoughts that flashed through her mind at that moment. Did she think that my womanhood would be awakened at the touch of that baby form in my arms? But the look on her face made me almost drop the child as though I held a viper to my bosom.

I always had had the feeling that we nuns were

policed, suspected. Those over us were ever on the alert to see evil. I think they knew too much about it and so looked for it. I do not think they found it. I never saw any evidences of it, at any rate. Still, if two nuns were seen talking together several times at recreation, if there were the slightest suspicion that a particular friendship were being formed, they were called over the coals immediately, and a stop put to any further intercourse. Never was a sister allowed to go into another's cell, except the Infirmarian.

Yet, surely if anyone is pure on this earth, it should be a nun. If anyone should be unaware of evil, it should be a nun.

I remember a Spanish Superior remarking one day that if one really understood what it meant to be a virgin, you would no longer be one. In a sense, I think she was perfectly right. It seems to me that if a nun is considered to be liable so easily to fall into sins of unchastity, then the sooner the door is opened to her the better. If she be so frail that she must be bolstered up, guarded and policed, under lock and key, then her virtue cannot be worth a brass farthing. Virtue is a positive, not a negative, thing.

Because we are not tempted to commit certain

sins it does not follow that we possess the opposite virtues. It is easy to be charitable and forgiving when everyone round us is so good that we could not be uncharitable if we tried.

At the end of my second year I was sent to the South of England. I think the Doctor had a good deal to do with the change.

In some ways I was glad to go, for my position *vis-à-vis* Reverend Mother was becoming more and more impossible. But I regretted leaving the sisters, whom I liked very much, and with whom, after the first few months, I had been always on excellent terms. But it was not such a wrench as it had been leaving Scotland.

CHAPTER XVII.

I TRAVELLED to my new destination with my future Superior, of whom I knew nothing further than that she was a Dane, spoke English like an Englishwoman, and was a fine, handsome, fearless-looking woman of about sixty.

She sat facing the engine in the corner with the window open. I sat beside her dutifully, and before very long my eyes had collected enough cinders to fill an ashbin, and I mopped my face and wept gritty tears till a kind-hearted woman on the other side of the compartment begged me to sit beside her. The Mother went on stoically reading her letters from behind her large, owl-like, horn-rimmed spectacles. The cinders seemed not to trouble her one whit.

Having more or less recovered from my shower-bath, I settled down to the contemplation of the scenery without, with an occasional scrutiny of my new Superior's face. Strong, placid, not

easily ruffled, undemonstrative, a very strict disciplinarian I summed her up to be.

So far she had wasted no words on me. I had been shoved into the carriage outside the Convent door. I had kissed her hand as she held it out to me, *et voilà tout*. She had given me her purse at the station, and I had paid the cabby, bought the tickets, seen to the luggage, tipped the porter, and handed the purse back to her.

I banished all bothering thoughts from my brain, and allowed myself the luxury of leaning back in the seat and of drinking in the sweetness and beauty of the green fields, the graceful trees, and placid cows. It was my day out, and brought solace and comfort to me as usual.

The Mother sat bolt upright in her corner still reading interminable letters. I shrewdly suspected that it was a collection from her own subjects at which she had not even glanced all the time she had been away from them. All full of complaints, probably. During the two years I spent with her I never saw her lean back in a chair.

We ate a few sandwiches while the other people were away in the dining-car, and drank a little water.

It was quite dark when we at last arrived at our destination. Two nuns were on the station to meet us. They embraced first the Mother, then me. They were strangers to me. I could not see their faces. We got into a carriage and were driven off.

The following morning my breakfast was brought to me in my cell by the Infirmarian, who had been told that I had been sent South on account of my health. She was a nice, quiet little mouse of a thing. She asked me how I was, and told me not to get up till I felt inclined. It was to be a really lazy day.

It was a great luxury for me to lie there quietly with the window wide open, and the glorious country air streaming in.

I wondered how things would be, and took a strong resolve to have as little to do with the children as possible, to keep myself very much to myself, so as to steer clear of stirring up any jealousy. I would remain shut close in my shell, leading my inner life with God.

But, after a while, my stupid conscience began to bother me. It said I was quite well enough to get up and to go to the Chapel to say good morning to the Master of the House. And all the

158 The Killing of a Vocation

resistance and essaying to shut it up were of no avail.

So I dragged myself from my undowny couch, dressed, and set forth.

After my meditation, extremely badly made, filled with distractions that would keep popping into my head, I went out to explore the grounds. School had not yet begun, the children were not to return for some days, so I had time in which to turn round and find my bearings.

The grounds were flat and uninteresting, mostly given over to fruit trees and kitchen garden ; there were but few trees, and only one walk of about a quarter of a mile, all in full view of the Convent and School, the most hideous piece of architecture I had ever seen. High walls surrounded the whole property. Dreadful . . . a real prison.

The one bright spot was a model pig-sty, inhabited by a dozen pink creatures whose forms one wanted instinctively to clothe with a chemise, so naked did they look. I have always had a penchant for pigs, so I immediately set myself to win their affections.

At recreation I met most of the members of the Community. I had heard of some of them, but

did not know any of them. There were many foreigners—Spanish, French, German, Austrian, Irish, Italian, several of each nationality. English was the official language. All the sisters, except the French ones, spoke it well. When I say the official language, I mean that the Chapter was held in English, that it was read in the Refectory, and was used when the conversation was general at recreation (the sisters were supposed to make their accusations in English, too), but if we were walking in small groups we could speak whatever language we liked.

I discovered that one of the sisters who had come to meet us at the station was the Head Mistress. I was horrified when I saw this repulsive-looking woman ; to think that she had dared to kiss me. Her face was literally covered with grog-blossoms, in full flower, to put it nicely. She had big, ugly eyes, red-rimmed, with which she ogled everyone. I used to think they would pop out of her head one day. She was Irish, very ; gushing, with what she considered to be a charming manner.

I had to pull myself up sharply, and tell myself that she was my sister, a nun consecrated to God, &c.

There were some pretty sisters. On the whole, they made a good impression on me. There were thirty-five Choir and thirty lay sisters—a big Community.

At the end of a prolonged recreation, accorded in honour of the Mother's return, the obedience took place.

Of this exercise I do not think I have written before. At the end of every recreation a bell was rung, and at the first stroke one was expected to keep immediate silence, no matter what one was saying. Work was folded and put aside. The sisters rose when the Mother did and ranged themselves round the upper part of the room. The lay sisters filed in, and stood round the lower part. Then three sisters would generally plop down on their knees—no more than three were allowed to do so—and accuse themselves to the Mother of some fault against the Rule. The Mother would tell them to kiss the floor, or to lick the floor with their tongues in the form of a cross as a penance. The three sisters would kiss the floor together, and rise and stand back in their places. Then the sisters would ask permission, as the Mother glanced round the ranks, to have a piece of soap, a tooth brush, or any small thing

they needed for their personal use or for their employment. (Later on, at a stated hour, they would go to the Economat and ask for the article they had been allowed to have.) The Mother would then dismiss the sisters, after having perhaps recommended them to pray for some sick or dead person. She would remain standing at the end of the room, so that if anyone wished to ask her questions about anything they might do so. On this first day she called me over to her, and told me to go to her room with her.

It was, as is usual, very simply furnished. She sat on a wooden chair before a fairly large bureau, covered with writing materials, letter-cases, and books. A crucifix stood on the shelf of the desk, and beside it was a vase holding a single rose. There was a big bookcase stretching right across one side of the room, one or two chairs, a mat beneath her feet on the polished floor, and that was all.

She motioned me to sit beside her on a low chair.

“ You must not kneel, child. They tell me you are far from being strong, and you must take great care of your health for the present. You will, I believe, have a good deal of teaching to

do, for you are to replace a nun who died here just before the holidays. I have a letter from our Mother General about you. She says here—look, read for yourself: ‘I am sending you a sister in whom I have every confidence, and who can do everything under the sun, but who is very delicate, and must be taken great care of. I hope she will render great service to the Order some day.’

“I am not reading this to you in order to flatter you or make you vain, my child. But I think sometimes we need encouragement, all of us, and it does us good to know that we have the approval of our superiors. I feel sure that we shall be good friends, and that you will help me, dear child, in the onerous task that lies before me, to make this a fervent, holy Community.

“The Head Mistress will tell you about your lessons. I have very little to do with the School, so far. I am almost a newcomer here too, you know, and I have not yet been able to take over the reins completely. When you have been told your duties will you make out your time-table and bring it to me for sanction. You will not say Office in Choir, and I wish you to be out of doors as often as you can.”

“ Thank you for your kindness to me, Reverend Mother. I feel sure I shall be happy with you.”

She then selected a spiritual book from the shelves for my daily reading, and having kissed her hand I departed.

I was then interviewed by the Head Mistress, and just as the first interview with the Mother had made a good and happy impression on me, this second filled me with dismay. I felt that I was not wanted, that my coming was bitterly resented, and in a sense that I was feared.

I was no longer a little novice, but a nun of some years standing, matured ; I had been in authority myself, so could not be brow beaten by this woman, and she knew it and resented it. My time-table was handed to me. I politely thanked her for it and went off.

On reading it over in my cell, I saw that I had been given lessons to the babies chiefly ; mathematics and Latin to the upper school, not a single recreation to keep. I had never taught the little ones before. I was supposed to teach very well, and the most important classes and lessons had usually been allotted to me. I felt rather disappointed. I was not sure I could

handle the babies. I was also surprised, for the dead nun had been their show mistress, and I had been sent especially to replace her.

But I had not been a nun all those years for nothing. I was only too ready to accept anything in the way of obedience or humiliation that came along. I did not count. If it were God's Will, I would go and look after the piglets in the farmyard cheerfully. I sometimes thought later on that they would have been more tractable and less trying than the babies !

It was the first time in the whole of my religious life that I had kept no recreations. Hitherto I had been the Games Mistress. Well, it would be a change to see so much of my sisters at our recreation.

The girls arrived. I began my lessons. I was eyed, and commented upon, and quizzed, but I was by now an old stager, and it was nothing to climb into a rostrum and to hold forth to some thirty pupils whom I had never seen before and to exact obedience and attention from them.

Almost from the first we got on very well together. But I knew I was being watched and spied upon by the Head Mistress and her second in command all the time.

At the end of a week, the Mother sent for me and said : “ Dear child, I don’t want to scold you so soon, but will you be careful of your language, and do not use slang. I am told that you made use of the word (I held my breath wondering what on earth I could have said) ‘ frightfully ’ at a lesson the other day. The girls were quite shocked.”

I was so taken aback that I had literally nothing to say. I very nearly burst out laughing in her face ; however, I managed not to and, murmuring something about being sorry, went out. “ Frightfully ! ” It was too funny. Who had reported it ? “ The girls were quite shocked.” Poor darlings ! and I had overheard some of them swearing disgracefully only that morning.

When I walked down the School corridor I was watched to see if I spoke to any of the girls, which I had every right to do if I wished to.

As I gave my lessons, I would hear the click of rosary beads outside the door. I used to smile to myself and wonder of what they suspected me.

But after a time it all got on my nerves. The atmosphere of the School was hateful. I began to dislike the girls. They were false, liars,

166 **The Killing of a Vocation**

hypocrites. I soon discovered that they had no use for the Head Mistress ; they fawned on her in her presence, but reviled her behind her back. They would bring her presents as a sort of bribe, so that for a while she would wink at their breach of the rules.

I was playing Portress one day, and on opening the big front door one of the big girls came in with a huge bunch of red roses in her arms. I buried my face in the darlings, and said, " How lovely ! "

" Aren't they? How I wish I could give them to you, sister. But if I don't give them to you know who, I shall have no peace for a month. I made Mother buy them for me, so as to propitiate old 'Red Nose.' Poor little Mother fondly thinks they are for the Blessed Sacrament ! "

This I came to find out gradually was the spirit of the School. Anything for peace—lies, bribes, sweet smiles in front of the nun, behind her back ridicule, disrespect, dislike.

The girls did not like Reverend Mother either. " She was so cold, so narrow-minded, so severe, at least, so the Head Mistress said." I did my utmost to combat this. After a time, when they had got to like me and to respect my judgment,

they began to think that if I liked her, she must be "all right." But they were never allowed to see her in private. In a country house, where the Superior has not many visitors or outside work, she naturally has time for the children for whom she is responsible as for the nuns. The Head Mistress is merely her deputy, her go-between.

Unfortunately, the Mother went to the School once a week only, saw all the children together, the Head Mistress being present, when she was asked to scold them for their misdemeanours, and so was seen when she was most formidable.

I began to be very bored with it all. This continual bad spirit, party spirit, and domestic politics again. I found distinct camps among the nuns too . . . and I sided naturally with the loyal ones. I had not become a nun to be involved in all this jealousy, spite, and uncharitableness. I hated the whole thing. I felt caught up in a web, out of which I could not fight my way. Here were we all, supposedly striving after perfection, seething with dissension.

Two girls were placed in this School because their parents had heard that I was there. A condition was made that I should see as much as

possible of the two girls, whose sisters I had brought up.

The poor children were anathema from the word go. Nothing they did was right.

I obtained permission from the Mother to see them alone for half an hour from time to time. They shared a private room to which I used to go. I was watched going in and coming out ; if I were a minute longer than the strict half-hour, it was reported to the Superior. I gave the spy the slip one day, and went round the house by a back and devious way, and was accused of having spent two hours with the children. Heinous crime ! Fortunately the Mother believed my word. But the indignity of it all. If I could not be trusted with these girls for two hours, why should I be trusted with them for half an hour. Of what was I suspected ?

These two told me they hated the place, the Head Mistress, the girls, because they were so double-faced. Why could they not see me more often ? They had come to this School simply because I was there.

I was placed in an extremely difficult position, for here was I supposed to uphold authority in the shape of the Head Mistress, and try to make

the girls like the School. I used to do so to the best of my ability, but I hated lying about her.

She was for ever talking about "County Families." She despised anyone who did not figure in Burke. I, it appears, was very third class, being an American. Yet she herself was, I was told by someone who really knew, from the commonest Irish stock. She who had never been blessed with a sou before she became a nun would spend money or make others spend it recklessly. She would get up collections among the pupils, and would turn up her nose at anything less than ten shillings.

"How old 'Red-Nose' hates you," they said to me one day in class. "She is always hinting and saying hateful things about you."

It was almost impossible to shut the children up and to go on with the lesson. Strange to say, although she disliked me so, I seemed to wield a sort of fascination over her. At recreation she invariably would sidle up to me and talk ingratiatingly. I used to be perfectly charming to her, entirely unconscious of everything going on, apparently. She got no change out of me.

After the Chapter on Sunday, we used to go off hurriedly to the classes where the children awaited us in silence (dying always, of course, to know where we had been, and what we had been up to). Almost invariably she made scathing remarks about the instruction, "so narrow-minded, so un-English." I would look her straight in the face. "Do you think so? I don't." I wondered how she dared to say such things to me, but she knew that though and because I liked and admired the Superior I should not repeat such hateful remarks to her.

What humbug those Chapters were, I used to think. Reverend Mother knew pretty well how things were : the disunion, the bad spirit among certain sisters both in the Community and in the School. Yet she would exhort us to the practice of the highest virtues, instead of going to the root of things, and exposing the canker devouring us.

Then the sisters would accuse themselves of their faults against the Rule. Rubbishy imperfections for the most part, raising the eyes in forbidden places, and so forth, while we knew, many of us, that certain of them had been guilty of flagrant breaches, not of the Rule merely,

but of their vows, a very much more serious thing.

For instance, it is a grave fault to speak during the Great Silence, which begins at 8 p.m. and ends only after breakfast next morning. Not even the Superior would break this silence unless it were a matter of life or death. Yet the Head Mistress habitually went to the private rooms of the bigger girls, sat on their beds, and talked to them till 10 p.m. and after. I heard afterwards from one girl that she used to weep and ask, "Why do you love that woman instead of me?" — "that woman" being myself.

I have seen her and others in a furious rage with the children, shouting and stamping, and on two occasions box a child so violently on the ear that she knocked her down. Then these same nuns would accuse in a sweet, gentle voice of "having been slightly impatient with the children."

Such a farce the whole affair. I used to think I should love to be Superior for a few weeks, to have the authority to say: "What a pack of liars we all are. Here am I preaching perfection to you, when the majority of you do not possess even the common and garden virtues of truthful-

ness, of honour, of charity. Here are some of you hating me in your hearts, full of malice and envy, and I know it, yet I smile on you and tell you to endeavour to keep the Rule better. . . . Let those of you who have some truthfulness and honesty left kneel down and accuse yourselves of what you are guilty—and for the rest, let them pack their traps and get hence.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

DURING the holidays, when the majority of the pupils went home, we used to get up an entertainment among ourselves for the sisters. There was generally some specially big feast-day to be celebrated at those times.

A small committee would be formed, a play, or several short plays, would be chosen, and the parts allotted to suitable sisters. We used to learn our parts in a couple of days, have two or three rehearsals, and get together a few clothes from the children's comedy boxes, as we used to call their theatrical wardrobe. It used to be quite good fun when the sisters threw themselves into the thing. We used to turn the sisters' Refectory into the theatre. The stage was curtained off, and we used screens for the wings. We were not allowed to discard our habit, nor the guimpe, but the big veil could be left off, and we used to dress up over these rather cumbersome garments. I made some very effective tow wigs, a sort of

henna colour, those for old parts being of white tow. I once played the part of a servant, with a large cap and curls which enchanted the lay sisters. It was a wonderfully good disguise.

In the Middle Ages nuns used to get up plays at which outsiders always assisted. But we kept our diversions very dark.

By the end of the holidays we had spoken so little that it took me several days to find the gift of the gab again, and words refused to flow. I used to get rather bored during those long weeks, and used to hunt around for jobs with which to fill in the time. I often had translations to do for the Superior of French spiritual works. I used to be given big screens to recover, or furniture to upholster. It was an outlet, and occupied one's mind as well as one's fingers. Eight long weeks of internal communion and brooding, of pecking over one's conscience like a hen on a dung-heap, ought to be enough to qualify most folk for the madhouse. As a matter of fact, a goodly number of religious do find their way to those dreadful places. Can one be surprised? These women have led an utterly abnormal, strained, highly-keyed existence for years without a break. Then, one day, suddenly a string snaps in their brain.

The habit is immediately removed, on the plea that they may disgrace it, and the poor souls are packed off in secular dress to the cheapest asylum that can be found.

There was one in Belgium, kept by nuns, before the War, where several of our sisters were confined. A pension of £20 a year was paid for them. I myself wrote the cheques for them for three years, so I know this for certain. On making inquiries I heard that they had been in this Belgian asylum for ten or more years. No one ever went to see them to find out how they were treated, or in what state of health they were.

. . . Yet they were our sisters, bound to us by the same vows and the same Rule. They, too, had forsaken father and mother and home for God's sake, and this is what they reaped. At the first signs of madness out they went, repudiated, rejected. . . . It grieved me sorely. I sometimes wondered if I too should go mad. How easy it is to do so. . . . Should I be pitchforked out in the same fashion? I determined that if I were to detect signs of incipient madness in myself I would immediately leave the Convent.

I saw several nuns lose their reason. One, poor soul, a Choir sister, went about brandishing

a long knife saying that the devil was abroad in the Convent and she was determined to kill him. God had told her it was her mission to do so. Then she said he had taken refuge inside one of the nuns, and none of us knew which of us she meant to knife. I had seen it coming on in this sister for some time. She would not eat, would get up at night and roam about the house. Of course, she should have been sent away for a rest and change from everything long before she got to this state. Most likely her reason would have been saved. But I had no power, and was told not to interfere when I timidly suggested that she was ill.

I had to write to different places to find if they would have her, and finally see her removed. It was infinitely distressing. Fortunately, the poor thing died after a few months in the mental asylum.

CHAPTER XIX.

THERE were a few amusing characters among the sisters who occasionally gave one a good laugh—and how can a laughter-bringer ever be sufficiently esteemed in this drab world?

One was an Anglo-Indian, hideous to look upon, except for a pair of roguish dark eyes that lit up the ruddy, round, moustached and bewhiskered face. She possessed a nigger-mouth, a broad, hair-filled nose, was short and very fat, always untidy, and rather dirty. It was impossible to send her to the School, for she was the laughing stock of the children, so she spent most of her time hobbling round the grounds leaning on a thick stick. She suffered from asthma and bronchitis, and when she had a high temperature would be found with her shaggy old head thrust out of her cell window "to get cool." She would then return to bed and gasp and choke for breath.

178 **The Killing of a Vocation**

I was rather a dab at rubbing, so used to go to her cell after Office at night and rub on embrocation back and front. Until I had seen her unclad, I had not thought it possible that a human being could bear on its bones such an immense flabby mass of flesh. It was a great experience, and I covered a good many square yards as I rubbed, chuckling to myself.

She was most absent-minded. One day a pompous priest, a great stickler for the proprieties, called on her. She hurried to the Parlour quite oblivious of the fact that her red nose was covered with boracic powder, that she had spilled coffee down the front of her creased guimpe, and that the tail of her habit was hooked up behind. She wondered why he stared at her so strangely and went away so hurriedly. She ran into me as she came from the Parlour, and I burst into laughter at the sight of her. I led her to a visitors' room which boasted a looking-glass. She went almost into hysterics when she saw the figure she cut, and wheezed for the rest of the day.

On Good Friday there was a solemn ceremony in the Chapel about three o'clock. The whole School was assembled. The nuns knelt about

the Chapel. A few moments before the clock struck three a signal was given by the Superior, and all the nuns prostrated themselves on their faces and remained thus for some time. On one occasion, this sister came in very late, puffing and panting, just in time to prostrate. Down she went with a plop. Hearing suppressed giggling from some of the children, I wondered what had happened. Later on they told me that she had forgotten to take off her muddy rubbers and that her habit was tucked up behind. Her sprawling bulk looked so comical that in spite of the awesome silence they had nearly gone into hysterics.

She had been a Protestant, and had lived for some years in a cathedral town. She used to compare the services, greatly to our disadvantage. I used to laugh at her and say :

“ Oh, you old Protestant, what are you doing in a Catholic nunnery ? ”

“ Oh, you young nincompoop, and what are you doing there, I'd like to know ? ”

In very cold weather we were allowed to have a hot bottle in bed at night. A certain lay sister was charged to put them there during Office. But I found that she not only deposited the bottle

in my bed but fleas as well. I refused to allow her in my cell after this. I don't know what her nationality was—French, I fancy—but she mumbled some kind of patois. She was the dirtiest old woman imaginable, and spread a most awful aroma around her as she cleft her way through the atmosphere. She was as broad as she was long, and she seemed to ooze oil from every pore ; but, in spite of these shortcomings, she was a good soul. On our feast days presents were made to each nun, some being in the form of a written permission from the Superior for an extra half-hour's sleep in the morning. We made one out for a hot bath once a week, and saw that it fell to her. She was most terribly distressed when we read it out to her (she could not read), she had never been known to have one. " And, of course, you are bound in duty to take that bath, sister," said Reverend Mother.

It was really most penitential to receive the awful whiffs and mouthfuls of smells as the lay sisters filed by to Holy Communion. Why should dirt and so-called holiness go so often hand in hand?

The " Fair Lily," as the children had nicknamed one of the sisters, was a strange being.

She ought to have been a beauty, but she had completely marred it by the habitual expression of disdain and scorn on her face. Her mouth had discontented, peeved lines, and she was absolutely colourless and thin to emaciation. It was a pose. She liked to look delicate, for it brought to her all sorts of alleviations and relaxations. A doctor sent her some medicine one day when she was not well, and in an unguarded moment the Infirmarian told her it was evidently doing her good for she was getting quite a colour. She refused to touch another drop of it. It was interesting to look pale and delicate. She never went out into the grounds, she never had her cell window opened. Moreover, with cotton wool, paper, and paste she had sealed hermetically every crevice through which a breath might enter. The stench that issued from her occasionally opened door bowled one over. Her whole system must have been poisoned.

In Chapel she would, in spite of all remonstrances, wear a shawl over her head. In the School, no matter what the temperature, no window was allowed to be open when she gave a lesson.

She sang in the Choir and was very proud of

182 **The Killing of a Vocation**

her voice, which would have been quite pretty had it been in tune. She would not believe she sang out of tune, and would sulk like a baby if she were not allowed to sing the solos. On feast days, when we had prepared an elaborate Mass, she would refuse to sing at all at the last moment. As there were but four or five of us in the Choir it was a catastrophe.

No one seemed ever to have corrected her. The Superiors were apparently afraid of her, and the sisters simply had to bear with her want of virtue. Yet she thought herself a saint, the dearly-loved one of Heaven. She said so naïvely. It was a joke when it was not exasperating.

She disliked me intensely and made no bones about it. She would go out of her way to be rude to me. She would say the most contemptuous things of the sisters and even of the Superior. For years she had been spoilt, and had traded on the charity of the sisters. But she was unloved, unwanted. When I was in Scotland the Mother had been asked if she would have her for a time. Consternation reigned, and the Mother begged to be spared the infliction of her.

The children laughed at her, and thought her a poor specimen of a nun, but she went on her way supremely pleased with herself.

No one seemed to have tackled her and told her the truth about herself. It was left to me to do her this service a little later on.

CHAPTER XX.

AFTER I had been in this house a year the usual ten days' retreat took place.

I had been much harassed and troubled for some months past, and I hoped these long hours of prayer and of closer union with God would put me right. I felt as though I had come to the edge of a high precipice, in the dark, and there stood groping, not knowing which way to turn for safety.

I prayed most ardently for light, for guidance, but found neither.

I had known for some time that I was coming to the end of my tether, and at the end of the term had written to the Mother General begging her to have me at Headquarters. But she had taken no notice of my letter. I asked my Superior to write for me. She did, and was told that they could not be bothered with me at the Mother House.

I began to fear that the ideals I had formed as a young nun might be nothing more than an illusion of my imaginative, of my high-aspiring soul. Life is but a succession of hopes disappointed and of readjusted ideals. The time had come again for a new readjustment; but no amount of preparation for a debacle such as I had subconsciously contemplated could lighten the frightful shock of realisation now that it had come.

In spite of all my efforts the end of the tether had been reached. Something within me was dead, killed by continual blows. The whole of the religious life seemed to me to have become a preposterous lie. To go on living amid a tangle of deceit, of uncharitableness, of distrust was now beyond my powers. I might go on living for twenty, forty years longer easily . . . but as a nun? I could not face those years.

But I put these thoughts from me as a hideous temptation. I used to walk up and down that bleak, ugly garden and fight it out by the hour. How much easier would it be to scale, shall I say, Mont Blanc with bleeding hands and feet, than to fight an unseen, intangible foe or an insidious doubt.

I used to ask myself if I could not endure as Christ had endured. . . . No, the inmost reply would be, I have endured enough.

I spoke to the priest who was giving the retreat. I told him, in the confessional, that I was much tempted to leave the Convent . . . that my character had changed . . . I spoke of evolution.

"Rubbish," he said, "a nun has no business to change. Her character should remain the same as the day she entered holy religion."

Very helpful . . . and obviously most ridiculous.

Then I spoke out to the Mother. She was completely bowled over.

"You," she said. "I cannot believe it. It is merely a temptation. You are such a good religious. You cannot mean it."

I told her frankly that I had come to the conclusion that I could fight no longer, and that it was far better to leave religion than to be a discontented, embittered nun . . . a whited sepulchre. "For God's sake, Mother, let me be honest. There are too many humbugs by far as it is."

She implored me to give myself another year,

188 **The Killing of a Vocation**

for her sake, for any sake, and I reluctantly agreed to do so.

But in my heart I knew that it was finished. Whatever it is that makes it possible for a woman to be a nun existed within me no longer. A veil seemed to have been torn from my eyes. I had been blind, now I saw.

People had often asked me how it was possible that I could tolerate the religious life, and I had always said, "Because I love God." Some months before I had assured a very dear friend that never would I leave the Convent unless my love for Christ were dead. Well, was it dead now that I wanted to leave Him? If so, why? I suppose that it would be blasphemous to say that perhaps His love for me had waned. At any rate, for a long time now He had treated me as though I were less than nothing to Him. I had done my level best all those years to be all in all to Him. I had wept bitter tears for my faults, I had done penance. I had lavished all my love on Him, yet He was seemingly deaf to my pleadings. . . . It seemed to me that He did not quite play the game.

Outwardly my life went on as usual during that final year of probation. No one guessed from

my exterior the state of my soul. I fought with my back to the wall. I prayed God a hundred times a day to let me die.

Reverend Mother continually pointed out to me the awful scandal it would cause were I to leave the Convent, and it seemed to me that death would be the best way out.

At this time I had letters from several of my old children who were themselves becoming nuns, "to follow in your footsteps." "You were always my ideal of a nun, and I pray that I may become like you," and so on.

"How can you think of leaving when you read those letters, my child?" the Mother would say.

No wonder I prayed to die. It was a year of torture, hourly, daily. A nun who leaves her convent is looked on by the others as a pariah, a shameful being. Why, I do not know. For, obviously, if the Church has the power of the keys as she professes, and can lock and unlock, bind and unbind, why should it be a dreadful thing to ask her to wield that power?

It required great courage to brave the scorn of the Superiors who had known and loved me, of the sisters with whom I had worked and whom I

190 **The Killing of a Vocation**

liked and respected. I knew that my name would be henceforth anathema among the majority of them. And the World I had left so many years ago, how to face that again?

I read somewhere once that if you go to Hell slowly you do not always realize where you have got to. You only know it if you want suddenly, most frightfully to get out. My soul had gone down into Hell, and I now knew it.

The burden of the Rule that I had borne so cheerfully for years had now become intolerable to me. The pettifogging, futile minutiae of everyday life seemed insupportable. Why had I allowed myself to be "cabined, cribbed, confined," choked, gagged, and bound so long, and to what end?

At the bottom of my soul I had often wondered why our lives should be made a greater burden than they must necessarily be. But such thoughts had always been thrust aside as temptations. In the Novitiate we had been warned never to listen to such devilish suggestions. That is the hold they had over us. Now doubts and queries were allowed to poke up their heads unrebuked . . . and I stood amazed at the way

in which I had ruthlessly hacked them down in the past and stifled them.

What is the object of the Religious Rule? To assist you in the practice of the perfect life. But I felt like Gulliver probably did when he awoke among the Lilliputians to find himself tied down to earth by a multitude of petty cords. I was awake, and the time had come to break these bonds and fetters.

I looked around at the other nuns. Many of them had been in the Convent twenty and thirty years. Day after day, year after year they accused themselves of the same faults. Were they any more virtuous, any more perfect than they had been in their early religious life?

I remember when I was in Scotland asking a sister of whom I was fond how long she had been a nun. "Fourteen years." "Good Heavens," I said, "and that's all the progress you have made?"

A most offensive remark on my part, but made in all innocence and simplicity. I meant, "Shall I be no better than I am now, after 'fourteen years' hard'?"

We most of us remained *in statu quo*, unless we retrograded. How many of us

preserved the ideals, the aims we had had in the Novitiate?

I knew of several sisters who would have left the Convent had they had the courage. But they were penniless, with no home to go to, and they dared not face the ordeal of breaking away.

I was suffering acutely all the time. Reverend Mother would send for me continually and go all over the old arguments, the old pleas, and it was torture.

She had allowed me to make some lace for the Altar as a feast offering to her. It was a great source of comfort to me. I designed it, and worked at it in every spare moment. How many millions of stitches I put into it, accompanied by the throb of an aching heart; how many prayers were murmured over it that I might die, or be given the strength to do the right thing! But it was a heartsease too, as I invented new stitches in the fairy gossamer thing.

I used to ask Our Lord to show me the way, to tell me what He wanted me to do, to speak to my heart as He used to do. But He turned a deaf ear to all my prayers, and it was left to me to do what I knew to be the right thing.

CHAPTER XXI.

I HAD been corresponding with a priest whom I had known for a goodly number of years. I had put my case before him, and asked for his candid opinion. He realised that I had quite made up my mind to leave the Convent, and that it was useless to bring up all the silly old arguments against my doing so. He wrote, therefore, to me that he considered that it was God's Will that I should return to the world, and that in doing so I should be guiltless of sin, mortal or venial.

Armed with this backing from my so-called spiritual director I wrote to the Superior General and broke to her the news of my resolve.

I received a heart-broken yet stern reply. "It was inconceivable that I should think even of taking such a step. She would not hear of it. It was impossible. I must go to her, and she would put me straight."

194 The Killing of a Vocation

It was too late. My mind was made up inexorably. Nothing and no one would now prevent me from pursuing my purpose in the quest of freedom.

I wrote to her again, and enclosed the letter from the padre. This, I knew, would clinch matters. The Mother replied that I had taken the wind out of her sails, that with such a statement from my director nothing was left for her to say. She was grieved to the heart.

A formal petition to the Pope for release from my vows had to be made. I was given a special formula to copy, in which I said that "prostrate at the Feet of Your Holiness I implore You to consider by humble petition, &c." I was told to give as a reason for this request the fact that I had never had a vocation. It was all the same to me what reason I gave, but this was not true. My vocation had been killed.

No sooner had I burnt my boats irrevocably by dispatching this to Headquarters (it had to go through the Archbishop of Paris to the Cardinal Protector of the Order, who presented it to the Pope) than the leaden weight that had almost crushed me was lifted from my heart. I was a new being. Life sang to me again. No more

did I pray to die. Liberty lay before me. I was happy. I gloried in the thought of what the future had in store for me.

I still had several months to wait for the petition to go through. Rome is never in a hurry. I had promised to remain till the end of the school year so as not to cause any trouble. But I did not mind in the least. I was free . . . and at peace.

I went on just as usual. No one must suspect me. The whole business was to be kept very dark. No one must know anything about it.

I wrote to my Stepmother and told her that I was leaving the Convent in August, and requested her to send me clothes, some false hair, and so on. She replied that though astonished at my news she was delighted, and would do anything for me.

Meantime things were going badly in the School. There was much bad spirit, murmuring against the Head Mistress, discontent. She continually referred to me before the assembled school as "that woman, so third class." I was American, so, according to her, could not be a lady. And the girls hated her for it.

There was a good deal of quiet talk going on,

196 The Killing of a Vocation

too, that made me uneasy. I felt that all was not well.

One day I was giving a lesson to a large class of girls aged about fifteen. I was talking of a bad conscience *à propos* of something that had cropped up.

"Oh," said a Spaniard, "you do know then what is going on."

"What do you mean? Know about what? Is it something I ought to know?"

I had not an idea of what she meant, but having said so much in a relieved yet distressed manner, I felt it was my duty to know the cause of the perturbation of the whole class.

Then they all chimed in—and I gathered from them that for some time past all kinds of unpleasant talk about sex had been going on all through the School. The girls knew that it was forbidden to discuss the subject, but some older French girls had awakened their curiosity and had told them all sorts of horrid details, and discussed the whole subject in exceedingly plain terms.

The majority of the girls had hitherto known nothing about sex—and were horrified and scandalised, but fascinated. Nothing else was

talked about. Several of the bigger girls, mostly foreigners, visited each others rooms at night, and had not been found out.

“ I shall go and tell Reverend Mother, my dear children, immediately,” said I.

A chorus of protests arose. She would never forgive them. They would not dare to look her in the face again.

“ Well, I cannot deal with this matter unless I have permission to do so, and that I can obtain only from Reverend Mother. Why did you tell me, unless you want me to put a stop to it? ”

They understood this, and agreed.

It was the first time in my experience as a nun to find such a state of things. Up to now the girls I had had to deal with detested anything that had to do with love or sentiment.

If when reading to them I came on to a love passage they would beg me to “ cut it out.” I do not think there were any unpleasant conversations among them. As a rule, too, they had but little chance for them. They were forbidden to talk in the dormitories and in class. At recreation they played games or surrounded the Mistress and talked to her, if they liked her. In the Refectory, the Mistress walked about from

198 The Killing of a Vocation

table to table, talking first to one group, then another.

Had there been any *risqué* conversation going on, my girls would have told me of it themselves. Up in Scotland they were absolutely frank with me. At night, when I went to them for prayers, if anything had happened they would tell me of it. On Sundays, when the week's report was read out, I often used to close the book, and ask them to confess their delinquencies themselves, and make them impose their own penances. They knew I was absolutely just, they trusted and loved me, and in consequence never deceived me. They were entirely frank and above board.

But here they despised and distrusted their Head Mistress. They knew how she spied on them, and so they had become deceitful. It was her business to know what was going on in the School, but she did not go about it in the right way. Several of the Children of Mary were her spies. They would make up to the girls, win their confidence by pretending to side with them, then go and report them. In this case, as they themselves had taken part in these conversations, they funked telling her, and she had no idea of what was going on. She seemed to be obsessed

with a detestation of my influence and of their liking for me, and could put her mind to nothing else.

I told the Superior what I had heard. I said that I did not know how far it had gone, what had really been discussed. She gave me *carte blanche* to interrogate the ringleaders, and to take any means I thought wise to put a stop to it. It shows what sort of confidence she had in the Head Mistress not to dare to tax her with her negligence.

I managed to get hold of the worst element. They frankly confessed to me that they had said everything on the subject that could be said, that they had told the younger children about it, and that they now realised that they had been pretty beastly. I put the fear of God into them, and made them promise most solemnly that never would they talk of these matters again. I held the threat of exposure and expulsion over them. Of course, I held the trump cards. Had the parents got wind of it, they would have taken their children away, and there would have been a shocking scandal.

There is no doubt that a lot of disgusting talk had taken place, and the girls' consciences

had been troubling them badly. They told me that they had not dared to tell the priest about it in confession, and that they had been making bad confessions and Communions.

Many of them had tried not to go to Holy Communion, but the Head Mistress prided herself on the fact and told everybody that all her girls were daily Communicants. If she saw from her place that some of them were not going up to the rails, she would get up, take them by the elbow, and propel them towards the Altar. I had myself seen her do so, and had wondered. . . .

“Anything for a quiet life,” they said to me. “The sacrilege rests on her head.” A quite appalling state of affairs. Fortunately some of the younger children were to make their first Communion at this time. Reverend Mother asked me who I thought would be a good priest to preach their retreat. I suggested an old man, a kindly old monk, and he came, to the rage of the Head Mistress, who had wanted to choose some young fashionable preacher.

Some of the girls asked me if I knew who was coming. I replied that I could not divulge his name, but that he was a dear old man.

“ Thank God. We shall be able to make a good confession at last.”

The whole School confessed to him, and he must have been rather taken aback when he found out the state of affairs.

Two or three months of bad confessions and Communions is not a first-class record in a convent school.

Reverend told me that she wished me to write to the Superior General and to tell her the whole affair. I looked at her and said : “ You are asking me to do a big thing, Mother. She will think I am writing out of spite, now that I am leaving the Convent. It will be the first time I have ever written to her to complain of a sister.”

She insisted on my doing so. I could but obey, but I hated doing it. . . . It was my last letter to the Mother General.

A tiny scrap more liberty was allowed me during these last months, and I made use of it to visit every day for half an hour or so a young Italian Choir sister who was bed-ridden, and had been so for the past two years, with the prospect of remaining so till death came to release her.

She had some internal disease, and was too

weak to be operated on. She was a sweet, gentle little creature, not particularly brainy, fortunately for her. She had a cell, eight feet by five, in which she spent her life. The sister Infirmarian tended her, fed her, washed her, and cleaned her cell, during which time she talked to her. The Mother used to pop in for two or three minutes to give her a blessing at night. The rest of the time she spent alone, in silence, reading lives of the saints, making wonderful embroideries, or writing a few letters. I got permission to take my lace in to her for advice. I made a point of going to her every day for a chat, to cheer her up. I was profoundly sorry for her. Often I found her with red eyes. She was so lonely. She was not clever, and had but few resources within herself. How it was she did not become a raving lunatic I cannot imagine.

To me it was inhuman, unchristian to treat any human being thus. I asked the Infirmarian why she did not go to her more often than she did. "She is too fond of me. I do not want to encourage her."

But at the end of a short time I was forbidden to go to her any more. The other sisters wanted to know why they could not go if I did. I think

that there was no reason on earth why they should not go to her from time to time, but it was against the Rule for two sisters to converse together, and in a cell. There could not be any exceptions made.

It had been wonderful to see the little thing's face brighten up when I poked my head round the door, and the grateful smile she gave me when I went away.

It was the same for the old nuns. I have seen old women of seventy-five and eighty, who had worked hard all their lives, relegated to their cold, comfortless, dreary cells. They no longer had any work to do, they were beyond it, so they had to perch themselves on hard wooden chairs, and endure till God mercifully took them away.

Why could they not have had a comfortable room altogether, with armchairs and a fire at which to warm their old bones? No. You would see them tottering down a corridor with their slops or sweeping out their cells when they could hardly stand.

One nun I knew and loved and respected was dying on her feet for four years. The Mother and Infirmarian refused to believe there was anything the matter with her. "It's hysteria,

imagination." Yet she was dying of consumption of the throat and heart disease. We used to climb the many flights of stairs to our cells after Office at night together. I used to have to pause on every landing for breath, but she had to stop on every stair. I expected to see her fall dead at any moment. What that poor dear soul suffered only God and she herself knew. A very short time before she died I was put to sleep in that same room with her, having at the time an open abscess on my neck. The Infirmarian said that she pretended she could not sleep because she coughed and could not get her breath, and told me to keep an eye on her. She had not the strength to talk to me at all. We spent an awful night ; I feverish with the pain of my abscess, she not able to breathe. I thanked Heaven when she died, unloved . . . uncared for.

It was a crime to be ill—to have a headache. You felt you were suspected of foxing—you were soft—a mollicoddle. There was a middle-aged nun I knew who used to look ghastly. She was worked to death. She said at last that she felt very ill, and that she thought she had something

wrong internally. No notice was taken of her, though anyone with a seeing eye could tell she was suffering acutely. At last she became desperate, and took matters into her own hands. She was missing one day. Panic, search, then her flight was ascertained. She had got a friend to bring her a disguise, and she had walked quietly out of the Convent. She went to her friend's house, a specialist was sent for, an immediate operation was performed in order to save her life.

It was hushed up. She was mad, they said.

I had seen many nuns leave the Convent—by the front door—that is to say, with the Pope's permission. They had always been impossible people, slackers, and extremely glad had we been to see the back of them. But this was the first I had known to run away. And she was driven to it by cruel treatment. It is considered a terrible thing to do, a mortal sin, but what about the sin of those who have forced a poor creature to take the law into her own hands? Do they accuse themselves of having been partners in the sin—accomplices almost of the so-called guilty one?

An old lay sister died suddenly one day, and

there had to be an inquest. The Superior said to me afterwards that it had been a horrible ordeal. Amongst other questions the Coroner had asked in a censorious manner when the sister had last had a change of air. Luckily, she had been sent to a country House for a week the year before her death. But before that, during the fifty years of her religious life, she had lived in the same house without a single holiday.

In a way, the lay sisters had a freer life than the Choir sisters. The Superior saw but little of them. At recreation they were left to themselves, they could talk to whomsoever they pleased. They were not watched so much as we were. They had their own special work to do, such as have the entire charge of a dormitory or the Refectory, and they were their own mistresses in their work. Of course, they spied on one another and told tales to the Mother, still they were not so much in the public eye as we were, and could live their own little lives more peacefully.

Oh, that hateful system of spying and tale-telling ! “ Mother, I think you ought to know that sister so-and-so does this, that, or the other, or said such-and-such a thing. I was very

shocked because her remarks were not supernatural."

One of my Superiors said to me once : " My dear child, you must really be more careful. It appears that a child said to you at recreation the other day, ' Mother, this is no place for you. You ought to be in a ball-room.' And you merely looked at her and said, ' Quite so.' The child was perfectly horrified, and so scandalised that for the sake of her peace of mind told her Mistress of Class, who reported it to me."

As a matter of fact, I did not even recall the incident. But what on earth could I have said to the impertinent child? Pinpricks, if you will, but multiplied daily, yearly they become a formidable burden.

At this time, knowing that the day of my release was dawning, I used to look at the others and cogitate over them. How did they stand it? Why did they go on with it? Were they better, more virtuous than I? Were they built differently? Why was it that they could go on year in year out, quite happy and content apparently? . . . Some were, I think, of a phlegmatic nature, who felt things very little . . . they liked the routine, the ordered life. They stodged away

208 The Killing of a Vocation

at prayer, and were only semi-alive. Others were weakly, bewildered souls who out in the world would have lost their way. They were delighted to be directed, ordered about, fed, housed, and clothed with no responsibility.

The lay sisters found security, comparative ease, good clothes, food. In their lives outside they would have had a much harder life. They were, on the whole, good, pious creatures, who loved to murmur their Aves, and to browse through life after the manner of the cattle many of them had herded in their own country homes.

But among all these women there were some fine characters, mostly Superiors. They had an outlet, a chance for self-expression in their charge. So they could hold on. They came in touch with the world. Their lives were wider, filled with responsibility, and this kept them going.

Towards the end of my time the Mother asked me to remain for the retreat, so as to look after the house, the money affairs, to direct things during that time. I agreed to do so, and arranged to leave immediately after it.

The Mother General, who thought my leaving would cause grievous scandal, arranged that I

should go to the South of France to a small House where there were but few sisters. I was to stay there for a few days, and then I should be called to Paris, ostensibly to join a Superior who was going to the waters for her throat. I could not travel alone without arousing suspicion immediately. So I suggested that the " Fair Lily " should accompany me. The Mother would be left in peace without her for the rest of the holidays. The suggestion was accepted.

During the retreat (I was the only person not making it, except the Mother, who spent her days interviewing the sisters) I had to look after the two priests—one French, the other English—who were preaching it. I had known the French one in the confessional for years in the other Houses I had been in. But he did not know me outside, and would only have known me had I confessed to him. We had some wonderful talks together. But little did he suspect when he told me that he hoped very much to see me again in the future, and asked me to write to him, that I should have discarded my habit in a few days' time! I hated deceiving him, but I could not undeceive him—firstly, because I had promised to tell no one, and, secondly, because I should

have brought down on my unfortunate head an avalanche of remonstrances and objurgations.

He told me he should speak of me to the Superior General, whom he knew well. The poor man must have had the surprise of his life if she told him the truth about me.

It amused me somewhat I must say. . . .

I packed everything I possessed, little enough, indeed, so as to leave not a single trace of myself behind. In a suitcase I put all the things my Stepmother had sent me.

I had several heartrending interviews with the Mother. It grieved her sorely to see me go. We had become real friends. She bewailed the fact that in the two years I had been with her she had not had the slightest influence over me. I had not realised it till she stated the fact, but so it was. She had been used to wielding her power over others considerably, and it hurt her rather that she should have failed with me . . . a tough customer !

I hated saying good-bye to her. We did so the night before I was to set out . . . so as to be alone with no prying eyes. We went to the Chapel together, and kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament she kissed and blessed me.

But my heart was at peace . . . I had no doubts, no hesitation.

The sisters bade me kind farewell the following morning. "Mind you come back to us, don't let them send you to another House." It might have been the other sister who was leaving the Convent for good, so cold were they with her.

The Head Mistress embraced me, and pretended to be dreadfully sorry I was going. "Be back in time for the beginning of the school year, mind." As a matter of fact the Mother had already told me that she was sure she knew that I was leaving for ever. She had got hold of a letter of mine, and had given herself away one day. I longed to tell her what a past-mistress in hypocrisy she was, but I looked her straight in the eye and bade her a fond farewell. I might as well play my part right to the end.

It was a hot, tiresome journey, but I enjoyed every minute of it. At Calais I had a momentary funk lest the Customs man should open my suitcase and reveal to the amazed and horrified gaze of my companion my secular clothes. To avoid such a contretemps, I conducted her to a second class compartment, and deposited her in a corner. She had been playing the invalid all

day, so I made use of her *rôle*, and told her that I would see to the baggage while she rested. She was not strong enough to stand about.

Fortunately, the official was kindly, and had a smile for the lonely nun, and passed everything unopened.

We talked a good deal on our journey, and the good sister began to think that I was not so bad after all. By the end of the journey I had completely won her. She unbosomed herself to me, and before I bade her an eternal farewell some five days later, I had talked to her as she had never been talked to before in her life, and told her precisely what I and all of us thought of her. I am bound to say that she took it like a lamb, and thanked me for opening her eyes !

We reached the charming little Convent, whose grounds went right down to the seashore. We were put into adjoining rooms. I had promised that I would tell the Superior my companion was very unwell, and had to be taken care of. So she spent most of the time that I was there in bed, resting.

I made friends with the Mother and the sisters, most of them rather decrepit. The Mother confided some of her troubles to me, and I felt rather

uncomfortable and hypocritical, but I was still under the promise of silence.

One afternoon I locked myself in my room, and tried on my secular garments, and did up my hair. I had been sent a coat and skirt, very stylish, a chic hat, and shirt waist. There was any amount of hair, side bits and front bits and a long switch. I had allowed my hair to grow during the last year, but up to then I used to keep it cropped close, like a mouse's coat. It had grown down to my shoulders, so I had no trouble with it at all.

I altered a hook here and there, tightened the belt a little, and got everything ready to put on.

My Stepmother could not come over to me. She had married again after my Father's death. I was thankful to have my own income to fall back on. I could not have taken money from her, though some of it had been left to her by my Father. He had left me nothing, knowing that I needed none in the Convent. But I meant to live very simply, and I had quite enough.

I had been told to stay where I now was till a letter came with further instructions. Two, three, four days passed. I went down to the sea, basked in the sun, drank in new life, chatted at

214 The Killing of a Vocation

recreation with the nuns—nice souls apparently—and waited.

Then at last the summons came. I was to go to Paris to one of our Houses that had been turned into a secular school when we had been forced to leave most of our Houses in France by the French Government.

There was quite a fuss when I informed the Mother that I had orders to proceed alone to Paris. Nuns, as a rule, never travel alone. But I had my orders.

The "Lily" wept when I said good-bye. "Why had God given me to her, only to take me away so soon?" Rather amusing, for she had had me two years beside her and had scorned me.

I was received in Paris by a Superior dressed in a dark costume, whom I had known slightly. She looked at me sadly; but I was not in the mood for discussions, or for sadness. I slept badly that last night of my religious life, and was glad to get up at daybreak and make a careful toilet. I was not used to this paraphernalia of secular wear. I put aside my beautiful habit with regret. I took my ring from my finger, my *alliance* as the French call it. That was terrible. But I would have no weakness. I

fought down the rising tears. I must not falter. The ring was a symbol—but the fact that it symbolised no longer existed—the papers releasing me had come through, and I was to receive them as I left the Convent.

Breakfast was brought to me. I could not eat it. The Mother came in. In silence I handed her the ring. She took it and gave a great sob. Horrible! I turned away, picked up my valise, and went out.

After a moment she followed me down, and as the great doors swung open handed me a document, which I thrust into my handbag. We embraced, looked sadly into each other's eyes. Then I ran to the taxi door (the first I had ever been in), and it was over.

Here, in my bungalow in Southern California, I write these lines calmly, impartially—I have no regrets. I am at peace, as happy, as content as human being can be in this Valley of Tears.

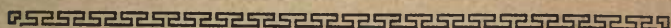
March, 1922.

PATERNOSTER HOUSE,
August, 1922. PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C. 4

Messrs. Hurst & Blackett's

ANNOUNCEMENTS

For the AUTUMN 1922



*A very important and instructive work of special
interest to soldiers and all students
of the Great War.*

My War Experiences

By

THE CROWN PRINCE WILLIAM OF GERMANY

In demy 8vo. cloth with numerous maps and plans, 24s. net.

This account written by himself of the Crown Prince's experiences in the war as Commander of the 5th Army (August, 1914), and of an army group composed of three armies (in 1918) is of great value as a military record, and will be studied with close interest by soldiers and others who are desirous of obtaining a true perspective of the war. About a third of the book is devoted to the part played by the Crown Prince's army in the Battle of the Marne, and illustrated as it is with maps and plans its military value is high. Another section—after an account of trench warfare in 1915—deals with the Battle of Verdun, fought exclusively by the Crown Prince's army, of which this is by far the fullest and most detailed account yet given to the public. A further large section is devoted to the 3rd German offensive and Foch's counter-offensive in July, 1918, the brunt of which was borne by the Crown Prince's army group. The numerous maps and plans inserted in the book will be greatly appreciated by the many students of military history who will need this book as an indispensable one for any survey of the war.

